DIGITAL CAPITAL AND SOCIAL ELITES IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Digital communication in China has seen huge development over the past decades, and promised great potential in networking and mobilizing various social groups, and even bringing along social and political changes. Interestingly, as a highly visible social force in the digital era, elites are oftentimes invisible in literature, or haven't been paid as much attention as they deserve. This research works to make this up by examining how elites construct, transform, and mobilize their identities both online and offline. The discussion is framed around classic social capital theories, which emphasize the importance of norms, resources, and network in the social structure. In order to better serve my discussion on digital communication, I propose the term "digital capital," which is a resource generated by symbolic exchange in the digital network, and can possibly be converted into economic, social, and cultural capital both online and offline, to refer to the digital representation of social capital. The microblogging service *sina weibo* is the main site formy case study research. By analyzing the most popular online campaign, online legends, and online popular talks over the past few years in China, I argue that social elite exists in the social hierarchy as a fluid continuum that connects with and permeates into higher and lower levels by going beyond others' expectations and extending its ability to mobilize withinthe huge network around it. According to Lin (2001), higher initial statuses, higher level of

education, and stronger extensity of ties, all add to one's ability to accumulate network resources. And more network resources to use, a wider radius of trust within the network, and better ability to mobilize around different identities as a responsible social being are key requirements for someone to become elite. Interestingly, the Internet has created a better chance for ordinary people to cross the boundary and get close to, or even enter, the elite circle. A good amount of clicks online can easily build up a huge network for an ordinary person to gain more access to social resources and more ability to mobilize around different social groups. Only if the grassroots power is able to construct overarching identities in the society and comply with the rules or expectations the public has set for him/her, can the society witness a boundary-crossing moment taking place. Therefore, top-down agenda and bottom-up force will collaborate within the social structure to initiate collective agency. Many cases have evidenced that, besides the nature of connecting similar people to generate more bonding digital capital within the network, the Internet has also boosted the network's capability in bridging different social identities for collective actions with instrumental purposes. But these single cases do not really indicate a more democratic society in China. Social elites, though oftentimes regarded as resources for ordinary people to retrieve more information, are indeed more of a regulation for Chinese citizens in terms of exerting subtle influence on how they think and speak. In this sense, I argue, what digital communication has brought to Chinese society is networked citizenship, where Chinese citizens are still being passively included in a huge network, only in the name of empowerment.

DEDICATION

To my father, Jianguo Zhang.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The year1985. A normal evening after dinner. My father is sitting in the couch, reading the newspaper, and waiting to watch *xinwenlianbo* (新闻联播, News Broadcast by CCTV, China Central Television) on our tiny black-and-white television. As long as we are at home, nothing will change this ritual of watching the news from 7pm to 7:30pm. Around 8pm, some neighbors will gather in front of our tiny TV to watch the only soap opera on air, as my family is one of the few in our community that has a TV at home.

1992. We have gotten a new color TV with more channels. My father still waits for *xinwenlianbo* every day after dinner while reading the newspaper. Nobody is coming to our place for soap operas anymore, since they have all gotten their own TVs at home. But occasionally, we will have a neighbor or two coming for an urgent phone call, as not too many of them have landline phones installed at home.

1995. Everyone is thrilled to know that our school has finally started a computer class after a long wait! Though it is boring to try to remember all the commands for DOS (Disk Operation System), the 15 minutes per student in front of a computer are definitely the best time in school ever!

1997. The computer class inspires no more excitement from students now. TV programs certainly don't. Some students go to the Internet Café (网吧) in the city to "go online (上网)," which sounds like a strange word to most of us. I decide to go there with some friends after all, but I only manage to stay for two minutes. The small café is filled with young men, either playing games or chatting online, smoking and typing. Well, it is not for me.

1999. We have gotten our own desktop at home, which can connect to the Internet with a modem and landline. The cost is pretty high, so very rarely do we use it. I only turn the computer on for homework or learning software, to play my English learning disk, and so on. It feels good to have a computer at home, so I don't have to wait in line with all the other students who want to get into the computer room in school.

2003. Among the 80 students in my cohort, there was only one who entered college with a cell phone a year ago. Now everyone has their own, though we still prefer to use a landline to make remote calls, which costs much less than calling from a cell. This year more and more of us are getting personal computers in our dorms, and we are used to going online with a broadband connection for both learning and entertainment. Computer rooms in school are still popular, since going online there costs nothing for students.

2006. Landline phones are more like a vintage decoration in our dorms. Each dorm in our university has gotten broadband connection with no extra cost to us. I spend most of my days sitting in front of my computer, with my roommates doing the same thing. We are all busy writing theses, watching movies, listening to music, playing video games, or chatting with family and friends, sometimes chatting with a dorm mate who is sitting right over there in the same room. We seem to not need a television any more. Most TV programs, especially the popular ones, are accessible online, some at a small cost. We can also get affordable broadband connection at home now. My mother likes to watch her favorite movies and soap operas online whenever she has time.

2012. Having been studying in the U.S. for 3 years, I am back in China for my summer vacation. Though very rarely is *wifi* available in public due to government

regulation, people can easily get online anytime and anywhere with 2G connection on a smart phone. I see old ladies, surprised and confused, looking at someone talking and listening to his smart phone now and then on a bus, when clearly he is not making a phone call. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and some other sites are blocked in China, but the Chinese have their own social networking sites like *renren*, *youku*, *sina weibo*, among many others. These sites have gone viral with millions of Internet users seeking information and entertainment online, while of course, you will need to register your online account with your real name according to local law.

So what is really going on? While 30 years ago, we all gathered in front of our tiny TV at a certain time of the day for *the* CCTV news, 30 years later, everyone is constantly scrolling down various news pages on our smart phones while on the subway, at lunch, or what-have-you, sometimes with an iPad in the background playing CCTV news or other channels of our choice. Seeing my 1-year-old son trying to touch and click on an image of a traditional cell phone on the page of a newspaper but surprisingly getting nothing, I wonder, will the new generation even understand what a phone, TV, or camera really is? What kind of change is really taking place in our society?

Before looking any further, I would like to first remind my readers, and also myself, that this seemingly universal question has to bear with China's unique features for this study. Though in the post-Mao era, especially after China opened up in the late 1970s, ideas of individualism started to show more and more influence on Chinese economy, culture, and even politics, the thousands of years of inheritance of Confucian collectivism takes deep root in every Chinese mind. For many Chinese, especially the older generation, technology advancement forces them to face the cultural clash between

more and more alternative ways to freely express individual thoughts and the inherited culture of pursuing collective values. It is this clash that makes China's cyberspace different than others. It has created more space for interesting cultural and political phenomena to emerge online, which I will elaborate more in my case studies.

Compared with Europe and North America, China started its digital revolution late, but it has been showing the world how powerful China's economy, politics, and culture could get with the help of information development. It was on August 25, 1986, that the first email was sent out to Geneva by Weimin Wu from the Institute of Energy Physics of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. And he was only able to do this by remotely logging into the account of Shuqin Wang on a machine VXCRNA located in CERN of Geneva via the satellite link (CNNIC, 2012a, p.1). Then a year later, assisted by a professor from Germany, on September 20, 1987, Professor Yunfeng Wang and others successfully set up an email node at the Institute of Computer Application (ICA) in Beijing, and sent out the very first email from China to Germany, reading, "Across the Great Wall we can reach every corner in the world" (CNNIC, 2012a, p. 1).

But not everything happened that fast. It was only in 1990 that China finally got its own identity on the Internet, with the top level domain .CN registered (CNNIC, 2012a, p.1). 4 years later, China's National Computing and Networking Facility of China (NCFC) finally put its 64K international special line that accessed the Internet via the American company Sprint into operation, which marked the moment that China, for the first time, was recognized by the world as a country that had access to the global function of the Internet (CNNIC, 2012a, p.2). Since then, China has been gradually extending Internet access from the capital Beijing to the rest of the country, from group users to individuals.

In September 2000, seeing the necessity of leading the digital revolution in China on the legal track, the State Council issued *Regulation on Telecommunications of the People's Republic of China* (CNNIC, 2012a, p. 6). This was the first comprehensive regulation in China that governed the telecommunications industry. A year later, with the information revolution starting to show more and more potential for boosting China's economic and political growth, *Outline of the Tenth Five-year Plan of IT Industry* was officially issued (CNNIC, 2012a, p. 8). China's informatization thus has gained huge attention from high political officials and institutions. And in November 2005, "The National Informatization Development Strategy (2006-2020)" was reviewed and approved in a meeting presided over by former premier Jiabao Wen, which shows China's determination and confidence in the information revolution as a good chance to keep pace with more developed countries, and to develop its own economy and society as a whole (CNNIC, 2012b, p. 3). From then on, China's Internet has been going through remarkable development. CNNIC has been publishing statistical reports on China's

Date	No. of computers with access to the Internet	Internet subscribers	Domain names registered under .CN	WWW websites	International bandwidth (Mbps)	Broadband internet users (million)	Mobile net citizens (million)	Internet penetration rate
Nov. 1997	299,000	620,000	4,066	1,500	25.48			
Dec. 1998	747,000	2,100,000	18,396	5,300	143.256			
Dec. 1999	3,500,000	8,900,000	48,695	15,153	351			
Dec. 2000	8,920,000	22,500,000	122,099	265,405	2,799			

Dec. 2001	12,540,000	33,700,000	127,319	277,100	7,597.5		
Dec. 2002	20,830,000	59,100,000	179,000	371,000	9,380		
Dec. 2003	30,890,000	79,500,000	340,040	595,550	27,216		
Dec. 2004	41,600,000	94,000,000	432,077	668,900	74,429		
Dec. 2005	45,900,000	111,000,000	1,096,924	694,200	136,106		
Dec. 2006	59,400,000	137,000,000	4,109,020	843,000	256,696		
Dec. 2007		210,000,000	11,931,277	1,503,800	368,927	163	
Dec. 2008		298,000,000	16,826,198	2,878,000	640,286.67	270	22.6%
Dec. 2009		384,000,000		3,230,000	346	233	28.9%
Dec. 2010		457,000,000	4,350,000	1,910,000	1,098,957	450	303	34.3%
Dec. 2011		513,000,000	3,530,000	2,300,000	1,389,529	356	38.3%
Dec. 2012		564,000,000	7,510,000	2,680,000	420	42.1%
Dec. 2013		618,000,000	10,830,000	3,200,000	500	45.8%
Dec. 2014		649,000,000	4,118,663	557	47.9%

Table 1. China's Internet Growth 1997-2014. All data from *CNNIC Statistical Reports* (1998-2015) and *The Internet Timeline of China* (1986-2012).

Internet development since 1997. Table 1 indicates how rapidly China's Internet has been growing and its potential to become as a great power in world economy and culture.

However, besides the obvious numbers on paper, what we really need to look into is the power behind these numbers. We need to ask who has been controlling the direction of China's Internet development, and who has been benefiting from the changes it has brought to contemporary society.

With no doubt, the Chinese government has taken charge of putting forward a series of plans for and regulations on digital revolution, and of course in the direction they want. On one hand, the government invests a lot in information infrastructure, to attract more businesses to invest in China's technological advances, and thus create opportunities for new business models to appear on the market. Moreover, people are starting to see more government officials, or news agencies, opening websites and online accounts to share either mainstream ideologies or just random personal opinions. As posted by CNNIC (2013), within the first three years that microblogging services started to show up in China, "By the end of October 2012, the number of government accounts on *sina weibo* had skyrocketed to 60,064, an increase of 231% compared to the same period in 2011; up to November 11, the number of government accounts on *tencent weibo* reached 70,084" (p. 1). But on the other hand, government regulation has always been trying to enhance its power online. Chinese netizens have to use their real names to register online, and of course have to obey certain rules when searching or posting online, or taking part in online public discussions. Besides the efforts of the Chinese government, domestic and international business entities, as well as social and cultural associations, all have been seeking opportunities to take their share of China's digital revolution. Therefore, people are receiving information from more channels each day, and getting access to more public discussions around issues they wouldn't have been aware of

otherwise. Chinese citizens have been so eagerly participating in this digital revolution that sometimes we almost believe we are witnessing the moment of everyone's dream coming true. Over the past years, especially since more and more Chinese started to get online with their mobile devices, we have seen enormous cases where netizens immediately and simultaneously got together online after a social incident broke out, to either silently watch the story unfolding, or more actively post their own opinions, repost others' words, or create some funny images or lines about the story, so that more people would be attracted into the public discussion. This is called *weiguan* (围观), which literally means to gather and watch. It is a new online term that refers to the action of following the progress of a social incident by clicking on relevant news, following and commenting on people involved in it, or more often, criticizing a social or cultural problem revealed by the incident. There are plenty of *weiguan* cases that I will talk about later in this study. And with more Chinese people getting access to the Internet and making the best use of it, we have seen many, scholars or not, starting to evaluate Chinese Internet with special attention to its potential for breaking through government regulation and achieving "democracy." The seemingly tacit understanding among scholars that it is legitimate, or even necessary, to relate Chinese digital revolution to the Western norm "democracy" (McChesney, 1999; Prior, 2007; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Meyer, 2002; Habermas, 2006; Lewis, Inthorn, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005), is very problematic. And this is what first inspired me to start this project. Although the discussion is an important one, the usage of such meta-discourses like democracy needs more caution. For one, as Howard (2006) observes, "despite all the principled discussion on how Internet technologies 'can' be designed to improve democratic discourse with the

right regulatory, economic, or experiential context, there are few studies on how--or if-- this is being done" (p. 37). Therefore, a more nuanced way to look at the diversity and flexibility of the economic and political systems as a whole is needed. For another, this meta-discourse can easily overlook local characteristics that are essential to evaluate the entire process. Especially when put into a Chinese context, discourse on media and democracy (even the public sphere at times) seems to take too much political burden from Western ideology. Qiu (2013) takes an even further step in denying Western hegemony in research on China by trying to avoid using terms like *digital divide*. He argues that it is too simplistic to just borrow this Western dichotomy for a Chinese context. It is not simply the contrast between *information haves* and *information have-nots* that constitutes the fundamental problems of China's Internet. Rather, there are social groups in-between these two ends that are playing significant roles in shaping China's cyberspace, for example, the *working class network society* (p. 28). Along the same lines, Chen & Qiu (2011) argue, we have been too focused on China and the Internet, while not enough attention has been paid to related Internet phenomena taking place on the levels of local culture, organization, or certain social groups (p. 311).Though I wouldn't necessarily agree with Qiu in not using *digital divide* at all, these statements are of great importance to guide my observations on China's Internet. In this study, I will specifically focus on some relative social groups, namely governments, ordinary people, elites, and so on, to see how the interactions between them have been changing in contemporary political communication.

As the Internet gradually grows into a place for different social groups to interact and build up brand-new and complex relationships with each other, it is important to

examine how powerful their interactions have become, or will become, both online and offline. It will be too ambitious to cover each and every social group within a single study. Therefore, I would like to focus on one critical, yet not-very-frequently-brought-up social group: the elites (精英). With the development of new media and technology, identity construction has become a more fluid and flexible process, and the interactions between people from different social levels are more complicated than before. The way elites attain and maintain their social statuses, and the way ordinary people watch and follow elites in society, are being reshaped with the new and ever-changing power dynamics in contemporary culture. It is of great importance to look into China's elite culture, especially their identity construction and transformation, which could directly or indirectly guide our understanding of contemporary Chinese society, particularly our expectations of possible changes within the huge online and offline network.

Chapter 2 of this dissertation reviews the literature of digital communication in a broad sense, and points out the "invisible visibility" of the concept of elite in previous studies. I call it "invisible visibility" because it is clear that scholars realize the significant role that elites play in shaping the digital culture, yet at the same time fail to define or specify who the elites are. To help define "elite" for this study, I borrowed from classic theories of social capital by Bourdieu (1986), Putnam (2000), and Coleman (1988) as my theoretical framework, and proposed the term "digital capital" to examine what contributed most in the process of construction and transformation of elites' identities.

Chapter 3 deals with the methods of this research, which mainly include case study research and critical discourse analysis. I used the broadly accepted Chinese microblog site *sina weibo* as my research site, and specifically picked several popular

cases on this site that had grabbed much public attention for my research agenda. I explained why case study is helpful in my research, and how I conducted critical discourse analysis in different cases.

Chapter 4 introduces a case study of the online campaign to rescue abducted children to examine how elites construct their identities on *weibo*. I picked three of the most active elite *weibo* users in this online campaign, including one public intellectual, one police officer, and one singer, to analyze how they shape their images online using different background pictures or wording styles, and how they maintain their elite status by interacting with other *weibo* users in different ways. I borrowed Nan Lin's (2001) social capital model of status attainment to examine how these elites managed to construct their identities for the public. I argue, only if one has access to a good amount of digital capital and the ability to mobilize that digital capital among different social groups within the social structure, can he/she really construct an elite identity in the digital network.

Chapter 5 discusses the transformation and mobilization of elites' identities, with a special focus on how ordinary people cross boundaries with the help of new media and get close to or even enter the elite circle. I used two case studies in this chapter for a comparative study, to further investigate what promotes someone to elite status. One is the online legend of *Brother Sharp*, who is a mentally disturbed homeless person on the street who suddenly grabbed huge public attention from a single picture of him. The other is a two-man band called *Xuriyanggang*, who were ordinary migrant workers in Beijing that became widely accepted and welcomed by Chinese thanks to a video of them singing at home receiving a huge number of clicks overnight. Though both Brother Sharp and

Xuriyanggang generated a huge network around them, only Xuriyanggang completed the transformation into elite identities. The difference is that Brother Sharp never took any control of this network. Rather, he was more like an outsider, or an object of discussion, in this network. He was never able to effectively communicate with anyone of his own free will, not to mention actively engage with others towards collective action. On the contrary, Xuriyanggang were able to maintain their overarching identities in the society, thus accumulating enough digital capital to work with, and fulfilling their roles as engaging and accountable citizens who mobilize around different social groups for collective agency. It was the process of being named as Xuriyanggang, and being titled as a migrant workers' band, and being institutionalized as a grassroots power that carried a promising dream for China, that helped Xuriyanggang become a symbol into which every Chinese could put their individual hope and trust.

Chapter 6 continues to discuss the political implications of elite culture for contemporary society, especially how it affects our perceptions of citizenship in China. I borrowed Yu's (2008) framework of seeing the Internet as both a regulation and a resource to examine its role in mobilizing and networking around different social groups. I picked two online popular talks as my case studies in this chapter. By observing how elites and ordinary people tell, receive, and retell a story, I argue that Chinese citizens have been taking advantage of the access they have to seek more visibility in public and therefore more power in political discourse. However, the regulation of elites on Chinese citizens often takes place in a more obscure yet influential way. The fantasy of freely collaborating with elites, or even transforming into elites overnight, continuously drawsmore and more people into the network. This fantasy not only boosts citizens'

excitement, but also boosts elites' ability to mobilize around the network, maintain their own identities, and steer public discussions in the direction of their own interest. In the end, Chinese citizens are still being networked to network with each other.

In my conclusion, Chapter 7, I summarized the key arguments of this study. Elite exists in the social hierarchy as a fluid continuum that connects with and permeates into higher and lower social levels by going beyond others' expectation and extending its ability to mobilize within the huge network around it. The more resources one has access to, and the bigger network one is able to mobilize within, the more digital capital he/she is able to accumulate to attain and maintain an elite status. Elite identities can be realized only if overarching identities are constructed to mobilize within the social structure as socially engaging and accountable individuals. In order to be considered elite, one has to show the capacity to represent and promote social values, as well as take the responsibility to care for other social beings and mobilize for collective agency. All in all, elites take a leading role in the initiation and construction of public discussions. Therefore, what we see in contemporary digital communication in China is networked citizenship, where Chinese citizens are still being passively included in a huge network, only in the name of empowerment.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW—WHO ARE ELITES?

To begin this study, we have to first ask who elites are. Though many scholars have touched upon this concept from different perspectives, it is not easy to find one definition for elites that most people would agree on. Only through thoroughly examining the whole social and technological background of the recent development of digital communication can we get close to a relatively comprehensive discussion of elites. This chapter will review relevant literature on both digital communication and elites to establish a basic understanding of the central concepts of this study.

Digital communication has seen huge development over the past decades, and promised great potential in networking and mobilizing various social groups, or even bringing along social and political changes. Certainly, the transformation of digital media production, distribution, and consumption has greatly impacted the process of contemporary communication. What is yet to be examined, though it has already drawn huge scholarly attention, is the question of what kind of transformation the emerging digital media might generate directly or indirectly in certain social and political arenas. Axford (2001) carefully distinguishes several discourses on *change* within scholars' understanding of new media and politics. The first is *techno-progressive*, which "credits the new, and especially digital, media with a restructuration of political spaces and identities" (p. 4). The second indicates a trend of *retro-nostalgia* for the past, as scholars in this discourse are more inclined to argue for the negative effects of digital media, with commercialization as a predominant feature (Axford, 2001, p. 5). The third discourse comes from the skeptics who do not believe in the transformative power of new media. Or, more precisely, the term "new media" is in question. They believe that the changes in

media technologies do not implicate a fundamental transformation in either media or politics. According to them, "'new' media possess no independent logic, no immanent dynamic, that displaces established practice" (Axford, 2001, p. 9). Clearly, a fundamental difference between various perceptions of *change* indicates an inconsistency in viewing the relationship between technology and the sociopolitical, or the transformation of technology and other social forces in contemporary communication.

The same, if not greater, difficulty exists when examining digital communication in China. According to CNNIC (2014), by June 2014, the number of Internet users in China had reached 0.632 billion, with an increase of 14.42 million from the end of 2013 (p. 3). The penetration rate of the Internet had reached 46.9%, with an increase of 1.1% from the end of 2013 (CNNIC, 2014, p. 3). Among these, the percentage of mobile users in China had also increased significantly from 500 million to 527 million within a year (CNNIC, 2014, p. 3). Image 1 shows the increasing availability of the Internet in China,
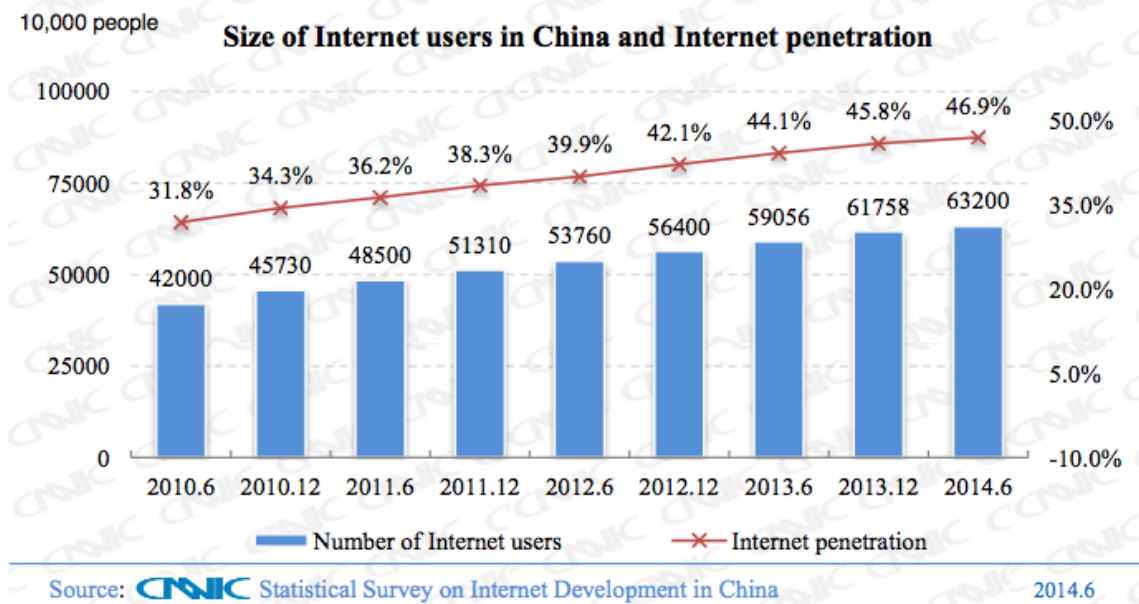
Image 1 Size of Internet users in China and Internet penetration rate
(CNNIC, 2014, p. 13)

as well as people's interest in seeing the Internet as a resource. But this by no means paints a comprehensive picture of China's Internet development. To study cyberspace in China, we need to first take into account the complicated Chinese context of government regulation and digital divide in various perspectives.

Though not the only or the most important factor, what we cannot get around when talking about Chinese Internet is government censorship. Howard (2011) argues that "(i)n many Muslim countries, censorship is not simply about protecting political elites, it is about managing political production and consumption" (p. 179). This is also true in China. The Chinese government controls technological development very strictly, especially when decisions on enhancing Internet infrastructure need to be made, or serious social incidents break out that could potentially go viral online. The Party is determined to construct the Internet with Chinese characteristics, which are maintained with a set of regulations (such as real name registration requirements) and a huge group of hired Internet administrators and commentators. Local or central government recruits these Internet commentators to post comments according to the Party's ideologies. Especially when certain sensitive social incidents break out and public discussions become heated among Chinese citizens or even in international media, the commentators will actively publish comments like ordinary people, but intentionally only say certain things in favor of the official agenda so as to steer the public opinion closer to the government's expectation. Chinese people have given these commentators a funny name, "50 Cents Party," as it is said that for each post online, the commentator will be paid 50 cents in Chinese currency RMB. No matter how ridiculous this may sound, the Internet commentators have formed a powerful social force in China's cyberspace. They are

visible to the public anywhere and anytime on social networking sites, chat rooms, online forums, and so on. Though to most Chinese citizens, it is unpleasant or even annoying to see the "50 Cent Party" active in public discussions, these commentators have done their part in the making of a unique cyberspace with Chinese characteristics.

Internet administrators are most of the time invisible to ordinary people. They are usually official government employees, some affiliated with local police stations. Their job is to carefully watch for sensitive topics online, and promptly delete whatever is forbidden by the government. The number one rule on every website in China is for each user to obey national and local regulations when searching and posting online. So, for example, you heard some rumors about a government official, especially a Party leader, and you wanted to search for it online. Most likely, when you typed his or her name in the search bar, you would only get an error page, or a message reading, "According to government regulation, certain content cannot be displayed." If you tried to post something about the rumor, you would probably find your post deleted in no time, or you might not even be able to publish it successfully. One way to get around this is to create new words or symbols to substitute for those sensitive ones, so that the Internet administrators won't detect your post right away. One popular example is to use the Chinese characters "河蟹" when saying something about "和谐." The two words share nearly the same pronunciation in Chinese, but have very different meanings. The former literally means "river crab," whereas the latter means "harmony," which is a popular slogan promoted by the Party leadership; therefore,it stands for the central government's political agenda. Chinese netizens have been actively creating popular online terms like this to collectively get around certain regulations. And these collective movements have

proved to be very powerful to mobilize people around certain political or social issues. But of course, the Internet administrators always control the bottom line. Once that line is approached, or even crossed, everything will be deleted, or the whole online discussion of that topic will be cut off. Sometimes, more severely, the people who initiated, or have been playing important roles in these events, will be physically taken into custody, often secretly. For example, in early April 2011, when the global political environment was heated up by what was happening in Africa and the Middle East, especially the Egyptian revolution, some Chinese citizens started to voice for a Jasmine Revolution in China. This is by no means allowed by the Chinese government. As an activist for democracy in China, Weiwei Ai, who has also been known as an artist, tried to seize this opportunity to mobilize Chinese citizens to collective action. He published words and articles online to advocate for a possible revolution. Not very soon after he started speaking about this in public, Ai was taken into custody by government officials at the Beijing airport on April 3, 2011. Though he was accused of economic crimes, some of his friends and colleagues claimed online that the reason that Ai was arrested was that the government was afraid that Ai would potentially organize a revolution against the government. On April 3, a considerable number of posts and articles on Ai appeared online, which represented how the public looked at Ai as well as the overall issue of democracy and China. Though some criticized Ai for his misleading actions of confusing art with politics, there were more voices in support of him as a warrior fighting for human rights and democracy in China. It did not take more than 24 hours for Ai's name to be completely screened on websites like *sina*. When people tried to search the name, again, the message reading "No search results displayed, according to relevant national laws and regulations" came up.

Besides government regulation, what is more important to take into consideration for this study is the digital divide in China. As Bimber (2003) argues, digital divide could be very useful in examining individual-level information retrieval ability in accordance with political action (p. 214). And digital divide in China seems to form a bigger concern for information access on the individual level. As a matter of fact, government regulation oftentimes plays a great role in the making of the digital divide. For example, after severe ethnic riots took place in Xinjiang in 2009, leaving hundreds of people dead or injured, Chinese government chose to shut down Internet service in Xinjiang, including mobile access. People all around China soon found that they could no longer connect to Twitter, which served as a major platform for Chinese citizens to explore and discuss the Xinjiang riot. As of the time of writing this dissertation, Twitter access hasn't yet been resumed. For one, this alone created a gap between residents in and outside of Xinjiang, as the former were prevented from getting as much information as the latter during that period. For another, which is ongoing, the government's decision to permanently block Twitter, *fanfou*, and other newly-emerged yet extremely popular networking sites, enlarged the digital divide between technology experts and the rest of Chinese netizens. This is simply because those who have more knowledge in dealing with technological issues are able to find ways to get around the censorship and connect to forbidden content online. This is called *fanqiang* (翻墙), which literally means to climb over the wall: *the Great Fire Wall*. Therefore, the government's moves to limit online access could potentially result in a more severe digital divide in China.

There is more to take into consideration when talking about China's digital divide. CNNIC (2014) indicates that a well-educated middle class male from an urban area,

especially the coastal cities in China, is more likely to be frequently online (p. 23-29).

This implies a more complicated social and political context behind these statistics.

Jussawalla (2003) specifically talks about China's digital divide, and argues that there is

"unequal IT access due to the emerging wealth gap" (p. 354). It is reasonable to make a

correlation between economic situation and people's Internet access, as statistics, like

those seen in Image 2, have been showing that distribution of major ICT (information and

communication technology) is greatly influenced by people's income.

Figure 2.3 : Distribution of major ICTs by income group of economies
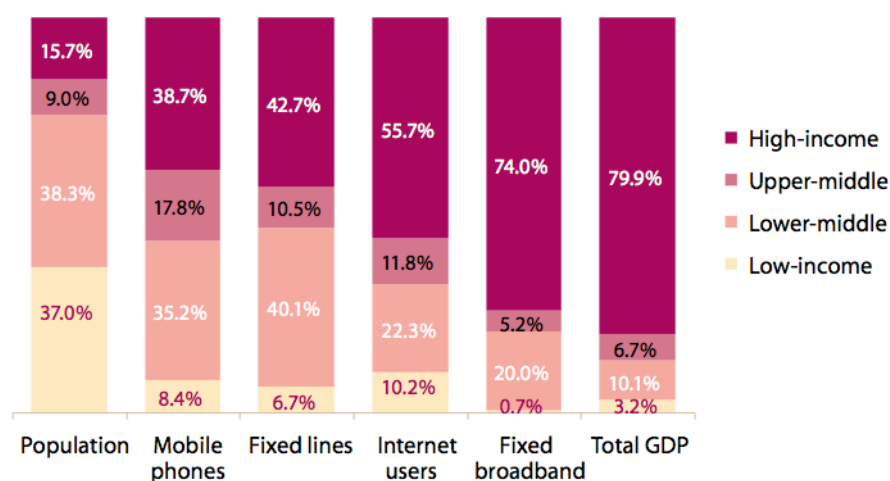
Note: Population data and ICT data are for year-end 2005, GDP data relate to year-end 2004.
Source: ITU World Telecommunication Indicators Database.

Image 2 Distribution of major ICTs by income group of economies

(Bridging the Digital Divide, 2007, p. 24)

Although, to a very large extent, economic situation is the determinant for

people's physical access to computers and Internet, it is not the only reason for digital

divide, especially in China. Warschauer (2002) argued, "access to ICT is embedded in a

complex array of factors encompassing physical, digital, human, and social resources and

relationships," and we have to take into account "content and language, literacy and education, and community and institutional structures" (p.4). Hanimann and Ruedin (2007), after broad examination of the term "digital divide," also argued that the term should include three prominent divides: "a geographical digital divide (between regions and countries), a social digital divide (between social classes), and an upgraded digital divide (between technology and humans)" (p. 1). Therefore, an economic perspective can only deal with a small part of the geographical digital divide; more complicated parameters must be put in place to explain the social digital divide and upgraded digital divide in a broader context. Giese's (2003) discussion of China's digital divide is a good example of such a broad consideration of the term. He not only pays attention to the infrastructure of Internet investment in China, but also, and more importantly, focuses on social background, including problems of illiteracy, poor education and training, and the government's unwillingness to fully overcome the deficiencies of web development. CNNIC always includes a detailed section about the composition of Chinese Internet users in their statistical reports, from which we can get a basic sense of digital divide in China. According to CNNIC (2015), by December 2014, among all the 31 provinces in Mainland China, 12 of them have Internet penetration rates above the nation's average rate. 8 out of the 12 are in Eastern China (only 10 provinces in total), like Shanghai and Jiangsu, where the economy is much more developed than the rest of the country. Only 1 out of 6 provinces in Middle China, 1 out of 3 in Northeast China, and 2 out of 12 in West China have a penetration rate above the average (p. 28-29). These directly show the correlation between Internet popularity and the economy of a certain area in China. The importance of economic growth in digital development is also reflected in the comparison

between rural and suburban areas in China, as shown in Image 3. As expected, less

developed rural areas have significantly fewer Internet users than suburban areas. And

this hasn't really been changing over the years.

As stated before, economic status isn't the only reason for digital divide. Similar

differences are found when comparing education levels. As shown in Image 4, most

Internet users have a middle school or high school education. Those with college

education or above occupy only a little bit more than 10 percent. The same can be seen

with those with elementary school education or below. The numbers have remained quite

stable in the past years. CNNIC also provides data on the comparison of income level

(see Image 5). The peak comes around the middle range of the chart, where the income
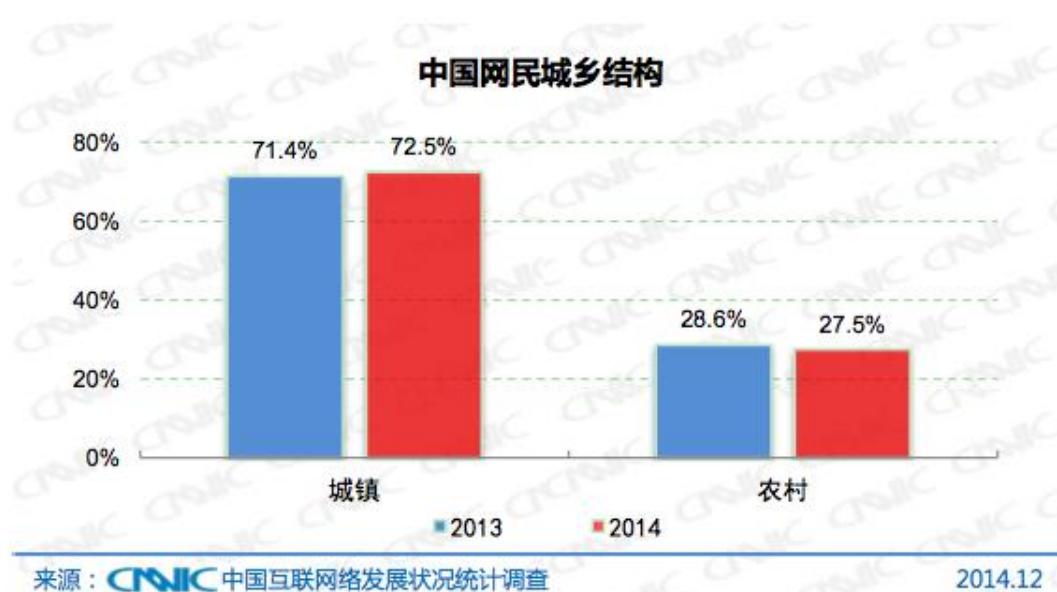
图 17　中国网民城乡结构

Image 3 China's digital divide in urban and rural netizen structure (CNNIC, 2015, p. 31)
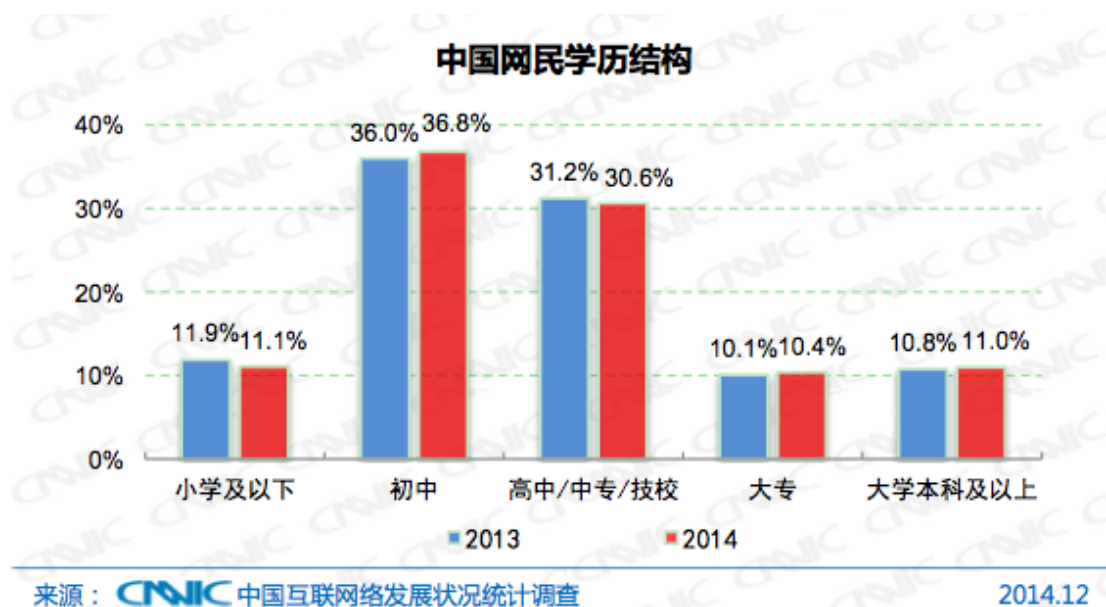
中国网民学历结构

图 21 中国网民学历结构

Image 4 China's digital divide in netizens' education levels (CNNIC, 2015, p. 33)

level falls around 3000 RMB per month. What's worth noting here is that CNNIC has

found a consistent increase in income among Chinese Internet users (p. 34), which

indicates some relationship between Internet development and economic growth overall.

Combined with these statistical reports, CNNIC has also done a survey on the

reasons that people don't connect to the Internet in China. In 2014, 61.3% of the non-

Internet users claimed they had no knowledge about it at all; 28.5% were not online

because of their age (either too old or too young); 17.3% claimed they had no time for the

Internet; and10.7% claimed they had no device to get online (as shown in Image 6). It is

clear that a lack of knowledge and skills to use the Internet plays a big part in digital

divide in China. Lack of access to necessary equipment to get
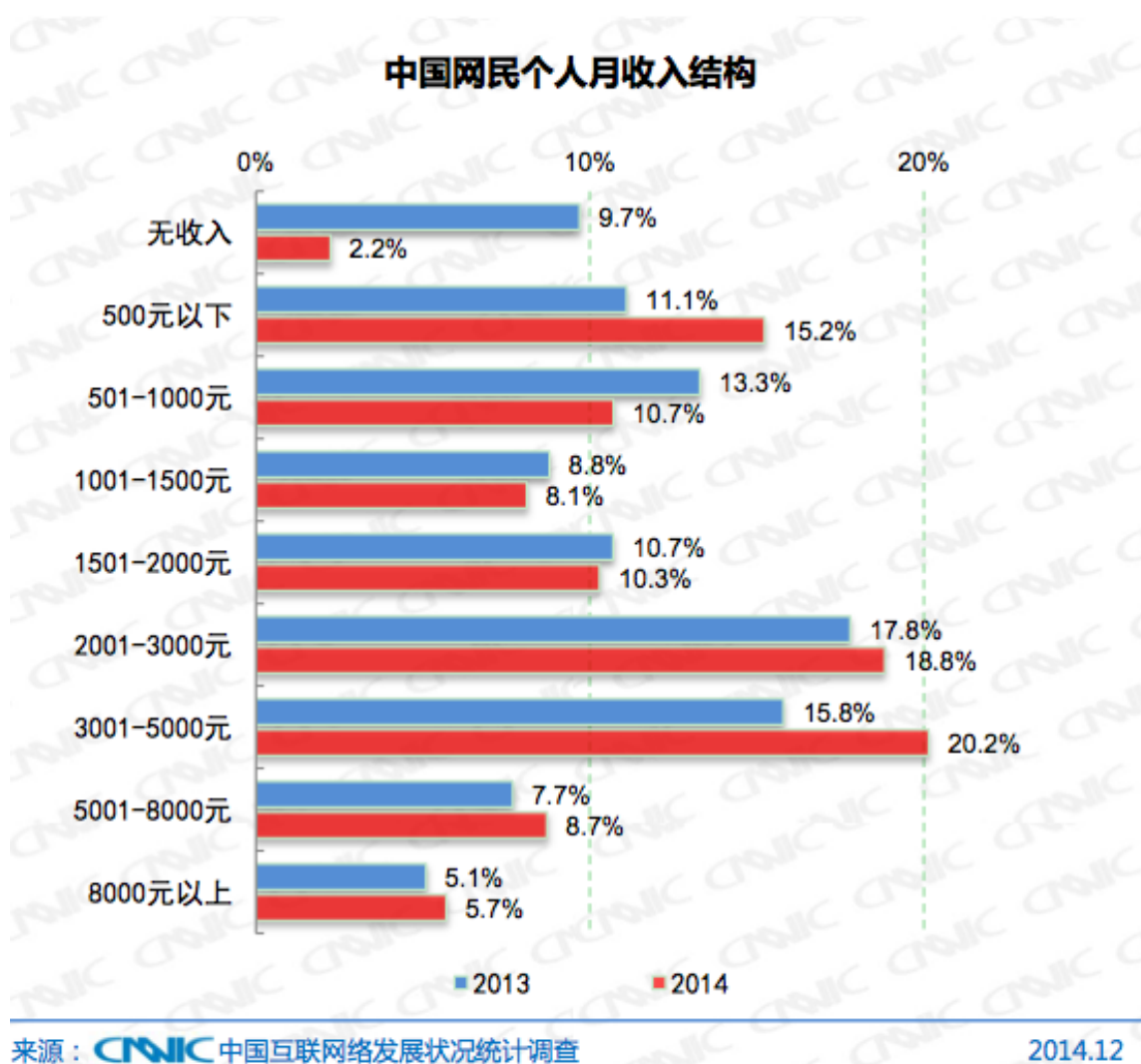
图 23　中国网民个人月收入结构

Image 5 China's digital divide in netizens' income levels (CNNIC, 2015, p. 35)

online, either due to personal economic status or overall geographic differences, is also crucial in blocking people from cyberspace.

These surveys and reports offer us a broad overview of unbalanced Internet development all across China. We also need to be aware of the fact that unique Chinese characteristics play a prominent role in guiding China's Internet development, meaning

图 13 非网民不使用互联网的原因

Image 6 Reasons that prevent Chinese from using the Internet (CNNIC, 2015, p. 27)

we must use caution when picking a specific perspective in doing research on China's Internet. And that's why this research will focus on a special social group–the elites–to see how their identities are constructed and transformed in digital communication in China.

But again, who are elites after all? Highly powerful as they are, social and political elites are always important to note, especially in political communications discourse. However, they are nearly invisible in literature. Though it is difficult not to touch upon elites as a significant source of power in the construction of technological advancement and sociopolitical transformation, not many scholars have concentrated on defining who they really are. When introducing "mediated politics," Bennett and Entman (2001) point out the importance of "understanding the centrality of mediated political

communication both in the governing process and in citizen perceptions of society and its

problems" (p. 1). For a long time, governing forces and (dis)empowered citizens have

been the focus of mainstream academic discourse on changes in political communication.

Intensified attention has been paid to: the deconstruction of the top-down agenda; the

changing features of how citizens receive information; the bottom-up grassroots mobility

created in mediated politics; how to evaluate and construct public opinion in

contemporary political reality; and ultimately, what kind of democracy is promised in

digital communication. What seems to be neglected here is the role of social and political

elites, who should serve as a bridge between the governments and the grassroots, from

either a top-down or a bottom-up perspective. But this is not to argue that elites are

completely left out in a scholarly context. Hindman (2009) actually does excellent work

in analyzing the role of elites specifically in constructing digital democracy. Zaller (1992)

also puts emphasis on the importance of elite-supplied information in constructing mass

opinion. But oftentimes, "elite" is used as a vague concept (Herbst, 1998; Lee, 2002; Pole,

2009; Zhao, 1998), as if everyone should know who "elites" are. Or, sometimes, elites

appear among the names of "political actors" (like in Castells, 2007) or "party authorities"

(especially in the Chinese context, like in Renwick & Cao, 2003). A primary reason for

not identifying someone as elite is to avoid using a broad concept to frame a precise

social group. Also, to label someone as elite while excluding others could itself be biased.

It is true that the process of labeling a person elite grants him/her a power in the social

and political arena that is superior to that of ordinary people. But failure to develop this

concept inevitably results in the lack of understanding of elites, thus missing the whole

picture of political interactions among social groups. Paradoxically, elites, in their

interplay with ordinary people, are considered powerful in public discourse, but at the same time invisible in systematic academic thinking. This research does not intend to give any fixed answer to who elites are, or what implications they have. The concept itself is a fluid one that requires constant examination and reexamination. Rather, I will look into how the social and political perception of elites has been changing with the digital revolution, especially in China. I hope to bring more scholarly attention to this dilemma of elites' invisible visibility, and try to propose several perspectives from which to examine elites.

Before defining elites, we may start with positioning them: to see where they are, and on which platforms they perform their social and political identities. Zaller's (1992) proposal of three categories of Americans is helpful to answer these questions. The first group possesses the highest political awareness. They take up "a small but important minority of the public that pays great attention to politics and is well informed about it" (Zaller, 1992, p. 16). The second group possesses the lowest political awareness and has a large group of fellows in the society who have very little information about politics. Falling between the two is the third category, and Zaller sees most citizens as belonging to this group (p. 16). Before going further with these three categories, I should note that it is problematic to distinguish people based on political awareness for two reasons. First, it assumes that everyone has equal access to political information. Second, with the emergence of unexpected forms of political participation guaranteed by digital technologies, political awareness has become even more difficult to measure. However, what Zaller reminds us here is the importance of seeing social groups on a spectrum in order to picture where each group stands on the line. In Zaller's model, political elites

will most likely reside in the first category, may also be found in the high end of the third, and, the least likely, may appear at random points in the second. In the next section, I will apply more theoretical and empirical studies to explore how we can position elites exactly, and what groups of people they interact with in digital communication.

A huge body of literature sheds light on the question of what kind of public sphere or public opinion is emerging with digital revolution (Bimber, 2003; Herbst, 1998; Lee, 2002; Hartley & McKee, 2000). Habermas (1989) envisions the public sphere as a sphere mediating between state and society, and public opinion is formed in the publicness equally open to every citizen. It is a place where citizens can participate in public discourse without being subject to coercion; therefore, the foremost characteristic of "public opinion" is its equal openness to citizens and its critical role in negotiating with mainstream ideology. Though the Habermasian "public sphere" has received critique for many reasons (Fraser, 1992), the basic understanding of "public opinion" as opposed to "private opinion" and affiliated with "(informed) citizens" is always of great value. According to Zaller's (1992) "Accept-Receive-Sample" model, citizens' political preferences, to some extent, are shaped by exposure to elite discourse. Therefore, elite opinions do have great impact on public opinions; hence elites play a great role on this public platform between the state and society. Habermas (2006) also specifically points out the importance of a feedback loop between political elites and civil society, especially that "the political public sphere needs input from citizens who give voice to society's problems and who respond to the issues articulated in elite discourse" (p. 421). There is no doubt that social and political elites are the ones interacting with the bottom-up forces

initiated by ordinary people and negotiating with the top-down agenda from the governments.I will further explore this idea with case studies in the following chapters.

Here I intentionally choose the term "ordinary people" instead of "citizens" in my discussion. As Bennett & Entman (2001) point out, one of the tensions "evolving in many democratic communication systems is between treating people as consumer audiences or as citizen publics" (p. xxv). Lewis, Inthorn, & Wahl-Jorgense (2005) identify a specific distinction: "Citizens are actively engaged in the shaping of society and the making of history; consumers simply choose between the products on display" (p. 5-6). Seemingly over-simplified, this distinction is very helpful in realizing the differences between citizens and consumers. To treat people as citizens is to presume that they do have at least some "political awareness," or the ability to participate in political discussions; therefore, it leaves out a huge group of people that are at the very bottom of the political system. To examine people as consumers, like Howard (2006) does when examining American voters in the digital era, is to support the fact that "informational duties and responsibilities once provided by the state are commodified and provided by independent businesses" (p. 189-190). To examine elites within a social spectrum, we have to include everyone in the picture. This of course includes engaged citizens, political information consumers, and more importantly, those who are often overlooked in our consideration. Though the term "ordinary people" could be politically biased, I am using it because it can best characterize the non-eliteness of this group's economic, social, and political status. And analyzing ordinary people as a whole can help me develop a more specific examination of Chinese citizenship. But this does not necessarily predetermine a permanent frozen line between ordinary people and elites. With digital media, everyone

is potentially playing multiple roles at the same time; hence their social identities are more flexible than ever. Interactions between ordinary people and elites are taking place in various forms on different sites. The boundaries between them are becoming more and more difficult to determine. Consequently, the next important questions to ask are: What characteristics make elites distinct from other social groups? Where can we draw the line between elites and ordinary people? By looking into specific cases, my research shows that it is more and more difficult to draw the line between the two, but the complexity also creates more exciting moments of boundary-crossing that take place with identity transformation and mobilization.

Again, as defining elites becomes a nearly impossible task, what we usually find is that literature is sets up a range of applicable occupational, economic, social, and political status that would best fit into a particular context. For example, Delli Carpini and Williams (2001) consider "elected officials, spokespersons for major interest groups, and so forth" to be the "mainstream political, economic, and social elite" (p. 174). Pole (2009), in his research on political blogs, specifically defines "elite political actors" as "(m)embers of Congress and candidates running for elected office" (p. 2). Not surprisingly, such a restricted definition helps Pole conduct more accurate research on how political actors use political blogs to interact with voters, but it does not give us the whole picture of how social and political elites perform and function in the digital era. Zaller (1992) defines political elites as "persons who devote themselves full time to some aspect of politics or public affairs," and these include "politicians, higher-level government officials, journalists, some activists, and many kinds of experts and policy specialists" (p. 6). Lee (2002) accurately points out the ambiguity in this definition, in

particular that it is not clear why lower-level government officials are not credited as political elites (p. 9). To me, Zaller's definition is helpful as a general guideline, but not necessarily nuanced enough when we move further into the context of digital communication.

Digital communication has guaranteed people multi-directional interactions with everyone and anyone spontaneously. This has provided us with multiple subjectivities to work with when constructing our mobile identities. Therefore, previously fixed understandings of certain professionals are being challenged. As Pavlik (2008) argues, new technologies have generated several opportunities for new media to appeal to their audiences. One of the most significant opportunities is "the transformation of the relationship between news organizations and their many publics, in particular their audiences, sources, funders, regulators, and competitors" (Pavlik, 2008, p. 6). For example, it is getting harder and harder to determine who journalists are, as there is no exact boundary between journalists, especially citizen journalists, and ordinary people. We do see more people taking out their cell phones or cameras to record and post stories online in order to provoke a public discussion on certain social and political issues, and unlike before, oftentimes the collaboration among different social groups makes it harder to precisely title someone, or tell whether someone is elite or not. Seeing this "fluid and shifting" distinction between "mainstream elites and marginalized counterelites" (Lee, 2002, p. 10), Lee offers this definition: "I consider political elites to be individuals who work full-time within formal political channels and institutions and who wield authority and influence over formal political decisions" (p. 8). This definition recognizes the

flexibility of mobilization within social dynamics, thus implying the possible political

influence from ordinary people, too.

The problem with this definition is the word "formal." The end result doesn't

need to be impacting *formal* political decisions in order to be considered an elite

movement. The enormous online campaigns happening outside of the *formal* channel that

do not receive enough *formal* political attention also present great potential to bring

someone into the elite circle. For this reason, in this study, I tend to avoid using the term

"political elites." I prefer to use "elites" or "social elites" to indicate that elite movements

don't have to be all about politics, although most of the times they do have political

implications. Elites can emerge from either the public or private sphere, either the

political arena or ordinary social life. Elites are social forces that have the potential to

mobilize ordinary people's opinions and construct a collective interpretation towards a

certain issue, political or social.

With this in mind, it might be helpful to revisit Habermas' (2006) explanation on

who would potentially become part of elite discourse:

> Media professionals produce an elite discourse, fed by actors who struggle for
> access to and influence on the media. Those actors enter the stage from three
> points: Politicians and political parties start from the center of the political system;
> lobbyists and special interest groups come from the vantage point of the
> functional systems and status groups they represent; and advocates, public interest
> groups, churches, intellectuals, and moral entrepreneurs come from backgrounds
> in civil society. (p. 417)

The three directions cover almost every possible background of elites, though more

professional and social positions could be added in each direction. For example,

journalists are powerful information producers from the "functional systems and status

groups they represent;" and technological experts, especially those with advanced IT

skills, are capable of participating in elite discourse from civil society. Part of the reason that scholars find it difficult to really define elites is because it is impossible to judge which occupational status or even political status would guarantee someone elitehood, while others would not. Therefore, it is more important to think of this problem with Habermas' framework: to think of elites as a fluid directional social force, rather than a framed individual or collective identity.

This reinforces my effort to avoid any fixed framework that might restrict our understanding of who elites are. Elites' identities are fluid and transformative; it is through their interactions with other social groups that their identities are constructed and reconstructed. Elites do not restrict themselves to a certain point on the social spectrum. Rather, they constitute a continuum within which they move constantly to perform different tasks with various others. Therefore, it is more important to examine how identity construction works in the digital era, than to define who elites are. And it is within the process of constantly negotiating and collaborating with other social groups that elites find their own position and construct their social identities.

The relationship between elites and ordinary people has long been complicated and controversial. While most scholars have no doubt of the fact that in general digital technologies have brought more information access to ordinary people, as well as more opportunities to tune out, or to participate in "the production and sharing of information" (Bennett, 2012, p. 25), not all of them are foreseeing a promising participatory culture growing within the interaction between social actors. Only some scholars hold a positive attitude towards the transformation of political communication systems in the digital era. Kriesi (2004) argues for a "symbiotic constellation of mutual dependence," which

ensures every participant opportunity to have some control over the context (p. 191).

Following this thought, Kriesi analyzes three strategies to mobilize public opinion in new

media: decision-makers' top-down strategies, media-centered strategies, and bottom-up

strategies (p. 191-198). Other scholars tend to hold a negative view of the construction of

public discourse in the digital era. Hindman (2009) points out, "blogs have given a small

group of educational, professional, and technical elites new influence in U.S. politics" (p.

103). Prior (2007) examines the increased inequality in political awareness between elites

and ordinary people. More specifically, Herman and Chomsky (2002) see little chance for

ordinary people to avoid the framing strategy that is always in favor of the general

agenda for governments and other major power groups (p. lxiii; p. 143). Zaller's (1992)

"Receive-Accept-Sample" model is also a good way to perceive the influence of elite

discourse in shaping public opinions; and when elites divide, the public tends to reflect

the ideological divisions based on which elites they identify with (p. 9). Bennett (1990)

agrees with Zaller in arguing that it is not accurate to say the public is divided; rather, the

elites are divided (p. 77). Along these lines, Howard (2006) claimed contemporary

citizenship to be a "thin, shadow, and privatized" one, as citizens do not have to really

actively engage in politics; what they are doing is simply responding to polls and other

political issues (p. 184-185). Apart from both positive and negative perceptions, most

scholars are taking a more cautious stance in the middle ground. Castells (2007), on one

hand, observes more opportunities for "grassroots politics" to grow from platforms such

asMySpace.com (p. 256); on the other hand, he also borrows Bennett's (1990) indexing

theory to prove the influence of political actors on media. Similarly, Blumler and

Kavanagh (1999) argue that "at one and the same time, more 'top-down' and more

'bottom-up' impulses are stimulated by media abundance, intensified elite

professionalization versus increased populism" (p. 225), as media abundance affords

more opportunities for ordinary people to act up by just tuning out, while at the same

time widening the cultural gap between different social groups.

It is indeed more helpful to see the information flow between elites and ordinary

people as a two-way process, rather than one-way, although the process is asymmetrical.

Dangers in examining the information flow as a one-way process lie in two points. First,

to see more political power in elites over ordinary people might lead to an assumption

that elites are more politically significant than non-elites. Meanwhile, I believe that even

if ordinary people are usually manipulated by elite opinions, we cannot ignore their

potential to become significantly involved in political issues, even unconsciously. Second,

to see elites and ordinary people as occupying two opposing poles could lead to a rigid

reading of political groups. According to Herbst (1998), many scholars have maintained

the idea that political elites tend to exhibit "more ideological 'constraint' (in Philip

Converse's words) than those of 'nonelite citizens'" (p. 127); hence more ideological

consistency would be found among elites. Though I very much appreciate Herbst's

efforts in locating participatory citizenship and covering lay theories, I find this

distinction made between elite and non-elite a little too rigid to fit into my observation.

As Castells (2007) argues, "technology is not simply a tool, it is a medium, it is a social

construction, with its own implications" (p. 249). Therefore, elite is a social identity that

is produced based on technological construction, as well as other social groups'

perceptions. Elites, as a social force, are positioned into a continuum within which they

can perform multiple identities across space and time with different technologies. The

interaction between elites and ordinary citizens is not a linear process; they can form very distinct relationships under certain circumstances. And most importantly, with the digital revolution, we see more ordinary people transforming into elites, and therefore more elite discourses actually emerging from lower civil society. The boundaries between elites and ordinary people are not completely insurmountable. Crossing over boundaries can happen instantaneously within social network(s). Of course this does not mean that we can annihilate differences between elites and ordinary people due to the flexibility of the boundary. Elites, in most cases, may still maintain more discursive power in directing public opinions, but the entrance to elite discourse is now open to a broader population.

In this sense, perhaps it is more practical to understand elites from the perspective of what they have, instead of who they are. The discussion around social capital serves as a good guideline in examining elites' identities both online and offline. Bourdieu (1992) defines social capital as "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 119). To Bourdieu, social capital could of course help in accumulating resources and bringing greater benefit for the network, but what is more significant to note is its nature of exclusion, especially when put into a political context. As mutual recognition is the most crucial feature of the institutionalized relationship, social capital oftentimes, even if not noticeably, becomes an effective tool for the upper classes to make their network exclusive to others. It is understood that Bourdieu provides a more critical view of social capital, while Putnam and Coleman—the other two most significant figures in the making of social capital theory—offer a more comprehensive "mainstream" interpretation of

social capital that emphasizes value and network (Franklin, Holland, & Edwards, 2006, p.

1). In Putnam's (2000) interpretation, social capital is not as political as Bourdieu's

version. Putnam (1995) defines social capital as "features of social life—networks, norm,

and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared

objectives" (pp. 664-665). He distinguishes *bridging social capital* between

heterogeneous groups and *bonding social capital* between homogeneous groups, and

recognizes that social capital can have negative and exclusive consequences (Putnam,

2000, p. 22). Putnam emphasizes individual efforts in accumulating social capital, and

argues that it is mutual *trust* that motivates people to join a network, hence reinforcing

social capital. In his observation, social capital is decreasing in American society with the

decline of civil organizations and communities. And this is to a large extent due to the

wide spread of technology and mass media (mainly radio, video recorder, and television

at the time) (Putnam, 2000, p. 217), which has privatized leisure into a more

individualized form for Americans. Putnam specifically states, "Television 'in the wild,'

so to speak, is represented mostly by programs that are empirically linked to civic

engagement" (p. 244). Seeing the new trend of digital development, Putnam adds a

section of discussion on computer-mediated communication, and examines both positive

and negative visions on the Internet. After analyzing problems like digital divide and the

Internet being more of a private entertainment, Putnam argues, "the Net is unlikely in

itself to reverse the deterioration of our social capital" (p. 180). What Putnam provides is

a comprehensive picture of the declining history of civic engagement in American society,

but "it is difficult to deal with conflicts or opposing interests using Putnam's approach"

(Siisiainen, 2000, p. 22). On the other hand, though Bourdieu's approach is accused of

not crediting how people "can intervene in their individual and collective destinies" (Jenkins, 2002, p. 91), his interpretation of social capital with special attention on power dynamics and political conflicts offers a good theoretical framework for my research.

It is not hard to see, however, that Bourdieu's seminal work on social capital has received so much critique and revision that contemporary study should not rely solely on his framework. Like what Manning (2015) claims, we shall all acknowledge Bourdieu for his concept of social capital, but "Bourdieu didn't attach as much importance to the social capital as the scholars who followed him" (p. 56), especially in the late modern era. Many scholars, including Lin (2001) and Field (2003), have criticized Bourdieu for being too Marxist and therefore biased in evaluating power relations between elites and other social groups. To offset Bourdieu's particular weight on elites, and give more credit to other social groups'agency, we shall not forget to introduce Coleman's (1988) statements. Coleman considers social capital to be "defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors—whether persons or corporate actors—within the structure" (p. 98). To Coleman, what distinguishes social capital from other forms of capital is its dependence on "the structure of relations between actors and among actors" (p. 98). Coleman understands social capital as "an important resource for individuals and may affect greatly their ability to act and their perceived quality of life" (p. 118). Anyone, from any social class, is included in Coleman's picture, as long as he/she has available social resources to use, for example, a neighbor to ask when in need of a babysitter. Therefore, what is really vital for Coleman's social capital is the social network, the relationships that someone establishes

in the society. Along the same line, Portes (1998) also argues that "social capital stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of memberships in social networks or other social structures" (p. 3). It is the institutionalized social network that really matters in producing social capital, no matter what someone's socioeconomic status, ethnic background, or sexual orientation is. Quan-Haase et al. (2002) specifically look into the Internet's effects on social capital, and determine three forms of social capital: *network capital*, *civic engagement*, and *sense of community*, which respectively reflect the private, public, and attitudinal sides of community (p. 293). To some extent, social capital is something that intervenes across multiple stages, hence a social process, instead of quantifiable assets (Bankston and Zhou, 2002, p. 285). Though Bankston and Zhou mainly discuss how to analyze social capital, their articulation of "social capital as a process" offers a great perspective from which to look at identity construction within digital networks, and how meanings are produced and constructed within social interactions. My research will start from looking at social capital as a fluid process, in which individuals constantly transform and reconstruct their own identities by interacting with multiple social groups within social network(s). Specifically, as this study is more about digital resources and online communication, I am proposing the term "digital capital"—or digital representations of social capital—to rationalize my analysis of elites' identities in China. The remainder of this chapter will go into further detail to explore how I use social capital and digital capital theories to frame this study. So what is "digital capital?"How can it help in examining elite identities in contemporary Chinese media? As mentioned, my interpretation of social capital mainly follows Bourdieu's (1986) articulation. Bourdieu points out, …capital can present itself in three fundamental guises:

as *economic capital*, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as *cultural capital*, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and as *social capital*, made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility (p. 242).

When I say "digital capital," I am not referring to the digital form of economic capital, which often appears in the form of digital credit and can generate wealth through virtual and material exchanges. Rather, I am referring to a special form of social capital, which emerges online, and can be converted to social and economic capital, or even cultural capital, both online and offline. Digital capital is a resource generated by an online network, that individuals could have access to and take advantage of, by interacting with each other and building up institutionalizable relationships. It has the potential of ultimately creating more material wealth, but it works in a much broader sense by working in various aspects of life. Like Bourdieu's understanding of social capital, digital capital has to be: firstly, an available resource within a network, hence certain infrastructure and devices to get online are must-haves; secondly, accumulated through mutual recognition, unlike regular social capital, as people don't have to be physically acquainted with each other. It's more of a virtual acknowledgement that people share online; therefore, how to draw the line between acquaintance and stranger remains problematic. It is very important to note this difference here, as it makes elites' identities even more unpredictable and transferable. In this chapter, I will examine the three forms of capital that elites have, including a particular focus on digital capital, to

pre-determine which ones are must-haves for someone to appear elite online, and more importantly, how I will use the social capital theories to frame the understanding of elites' identity construction.

(1) *Social capital*: does an elite have to be socially well connected with multiple groups or networks?

When talking about elites, especially the hard core of political elites, we normally consider access to government as their most important characteristic. Research on domestic political systems, elections and campaigns would most likely consider access to government as the key element for elites. Access to government indicates high "political awareness" (Zaller, 1992), and access to the most up-to-date political information. These elites also have more opportunities to wield influence over political decisions. Highly ranked government officials are of course guaranteed elite status with this feature. Lobbyists, intellectuals, some other professional experts, and sometimes journalists, also have limited access to government. More importantly for this research, digital technologies, especially blogs and microblogs, have made it possible for ordinary people to enter elite discourse withoutany direct communication with government. Moreover, new media sometimes allows, or even invites, those who go against government agendas to enter elite circle. This is especially true in China. As a matter of fact, what we often see in China's digital communication is the common phenomenon of those social activists who are anti-government becoming social elites by mobilizing online.

Consequently, access to ordinary people turns out to be more effective in building up elitehood than access to government. The number of connections to other social groups, especially to ordinary people, is vital for someone to enter elite discourse. The

Internet has shown great capacity in crediting someone leadership in constructing public opinion, as long as he/she could command mass attention among netizens. Chinese artist and human rights activist Weiwei Ai is a typical example. Though he does not have access to the government, or quite the converse, he always points out wrongdoings by government, Ai has become one of the few elites whose political claims are always well accepted and followed by Chinese netizens. Ai's elite status was gradually established through posting pictures, videos, documentaries, and other programs on his blogs and other media platforms, and his team is recognized as a core network to release information that mainstream media would try to hide. Encircling Ai's team is the grand network with an enormous number of people online that applaud him, collect information for him, or criticize him. As a result, Ai has access to more information and more audiences, hence more social capital. Ai's voice appeals to ordinary people in such an efficient and unstoppable way that sometimes the Chinese government has to consider related issues when making decisions. Emerging digital technologies have made access to ordinary people the most prominent feature that elites must have.

Another important group that we oftentimes think of when talking about elites is celebrities. Is Yao Ming elite? Or, are celebrities elites to our understanding? How important is fame for someone to be recognized as elite? I think that fame, as a quality essential to attracting more ordinary people, and sometimes more financial support, could be a potential reason for celebrities to enter elite discourse. But among celebrity studies, one of the trends identified by Jeffreys and Edwards (2010) is that "some columnists and public intellectuals regard celebrity as shallow and apolitical" (p. 5). This might have been true 10 or 20 years ago. With the development of digital technologies, celebrities

can hardly remain silent in public discussions as long as they have registered on blogs or forums. And rarely do we see a celebrity who chooses not to utilize online platforms to put his/her name out there as often as possible and build up his/her reputation. Celebrities are cautious not only of their professional performance, i.e. acting or singing, but are just as cautious, if not more so, of their everyday performance in public discussion, especially their words or opinions on critical social issues. For example, I agree with Schein (2010) that Luo Xiuying, a star singer with minority ethnic background in China, "has become a member of the cultural elite, now charged with bringing the hopeful spirit of liberation to other non-Han people on China's periphery" (p. 149). A more prominent example is how blogs and microblogs promote "top bloggers" to others, and most of the times "top bloggers" are celebrities. Fame does play a great role in building up a bigger network for (new) celebrities, and therefore surrounds them with even more social resources than they already have.

(2) *Economic capital*: does an elite have to be well-supported financially?

Normally, more money implies more opportunities for people to get connected to various resources and networks, thus accumulate more social capital and more power to influence others. Especially if we understand media globalization as the result of a huge system of global commercial media (Herman & McChesney, 1997), the manipulation over media by transnational corporations is powerful enough to direct public opinion. Powerful news organizations have more direct control over the consent-making process. Some scholars hesitate to include journalists in the elite circle. For instance, Entman (2003), who examines the interplay between journalists and elites, believes there should be a line between the two. But the question of where to draw the line leaves unresolved

(Entman, 2003, p. 420). Entman also states that "a few top editors, correspondents and editorialists exercise more sway over the spread of ideas than all but the most powerful public officials" (p. 420); therefore, news organizations do have the potential to influence public opinion. Following this, I would like to include journalists and other professionals in news organizations in the elite context, as they do usually have access to large audiences, financial support, and limited government resources. What further complicates this picture is the emergence of citizen journalists online. Although some citizen journalists also perform daily tasks as professional journalists, when they perform online, they enter a new network and reconstruct their identities. But being able to maintain a huge audience pool gives them enough power to orient public perceptions of certain issues. The only difference is the lack of financial support. Therefore, we can see that financial support is a plus, but not mandatory for someone to become elite.

(3) *Cultural capital*: does an elite have to be well-educated?

Most social and political elites have a high-level education. Education is sometimes critical to get access to direct communication with the government, to more accurate information, and to connections with other people. For example, public intellectuals have become more and more powerful in shaping public opinion with the help of new technologies. But a high level of education is not necessary for someone to attain elite status, especially in the digital era. Various examples can be found in the Chinese media. One of my case studies, Xuriyanggang, a two-man band, entered the elite discourse in 2010 after their homemade video got popular online. But before entering public attention, they were only two of the many socially underprivileged migrant workers in urban China. Their appearance made Chinese people look at migrant workers

in a different way than before, and realize the power of this vulnerable lower class. The lack of cultural capital didn't stop them from accumulating social capital and economic capital with the help of digital media. Moreover, Xuriyanggang's success is not an isolated incident. It raised huge attention to the social status of migrant workers in China from both ordinary citizens and the Chinese government, and we started to see more underprivileged people entering elite discourse with special political implications. With cases like Xuriyanggang getting popular in China, we should be able to state that education is not considered a must-have to become elite, either.

To conclude, among all these characteristics, I consider access to ordinary people the only must-have for elites in the digital era. All of the other characteristics are supplementary resources for people to enter elite discourse. Elites are able to gain more resources and a grander network by interacting with people online; therefore, digital capital becomes extremely important for elites to mobilize within society. In the digital era, being visible online seems to be the one and only chance to get connected and embedded in the virtual society, to generate nobility and engage others around public discussions, and to accumulate social capital, which might consequently convert into economic and cultural capital. As a result, digital capital, as an online resource, will ultimately interplay with offline activities, which reinforces its capacity in defining, or framing, an elite. Therefore, in my analysis, I will focus more on the digital capital of individuals, to see what contributes to their identity-making as elites or otherwise. I will pay special attention to some more basic factors of digital capital, for instance how a person's writing skill, look, verbal preference or choice of pictures he/she posts online

would ultimately affect his/her accumulation of digital capital, therefore impacting his/her identity construction and social status.

Before delving into the actual investigation on elites, I should first specify the research questions of this study. The ultimate question to tackle is of course who the elites are in daily digital communication. But as discussed above, it is not an easy task to directly answer this question, and what we can do is to understand elites by asking: What are some characteristics that will mark a person elite? How are elites' identities constructed, maintained and transformed in digital communication? How do elites mobilize and collaborate with other social groups, especially ordinary people, in public discussions? And hopefully, we can get a sense of some political implications, if there are any, of the elite culture in China's digital era. I will explore each research question by applying the social capital and digital capital theories on various cases online, combined with some offline activities that have affected elites' identity construction. The next chapter will talk about the methods for this research, as well as the primary online site that I will use for my observations and discussions.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

A combination of theoretical and empirical studies will be necessary for research on the construction of elites' identities in digital communication. As discussed above, scholars like Zaller (1992), Hindman (2009) and Bourdieu (1986; 1992) all provide great theoretical reference for my observation on elite status, but the context is mostly concentrated on the American political system, or at least from a Western perspective. As Tian & Chilton (2014) argue, "the socio-political changes in China have characteristics that deserve special attention" out of the Western box (p. 197). There are two reasons behind this. One is that "social change in China brings changes to a very large population, and to every corner of the society," and the other more fundamental reason is that "this change is taking place in a country whose political system is not the same as that of Western countries" (p. 197). Therefore, we cannot fully rely on Western ideology to analyze Chinese media. On the other hand, regretfully, Chinese scholars and Chinese studies scholars, like Zhao (1998; 2008), are oftentimes too focused on Party elites when talking about elites' interactions with ordinary people. This inevitably puts too much emphasis on a very restricted group of people and their political roles and implications in society. We tend to overlook more meaningful social and cultural aspects in such a discussion. I do find Yu's (2008) work on "media citizenship" in China very inspiring, especially her argument that digital technologies have served as both regulation and resource for Chinese people. But the lack of systematic observations on the boundary making and identity construction of social and political elites is a common problem existing in both American and Chinese digital communication studies.

Provided with these theoretical understandings, this research will apply a number of methods in order to best explore my research questions. More importantly, I hope these methods can fit well in the Chinese context. Different researchers have applied various methods to digital communication all around the world. Many scholars have explored quantitative methods in research. Zaller (1992) builds up several statistical models to examine polarization effect, attitude change, and so forth, and he relies very much on survey data to test the models. Hindman (2009) applies the SVM (Support Vector Machine) classifiers to help classify tons of web pages according to their relevance to certain topics. Prior (2007) conducts experiments and surveys to draw data on political behaviors influenced by new media. In contrast, Herbst (1998), looking into the field of political cognition in particular, argues that we should pay more attention to social and cultural perspectives besides methodological experimentation (p. 4). This of course does not deny the effectiveness and diversity that derive from surveys and computer-technology-generated data analysis. It emphasizes the significance of "qualitative and interpretive methodologies that allow researchers to probe informants and give them the chance to introduce their own phrases and ideas" (p. 4). Therefore, Herbst intentionally chooses depth interviews, extensive probing and conversational research techniques over surveys, "which allows for great generalization with less depth" (p. 182). Among various methods in qualitative and interpretive works, case studies seem to appeal to many scholars in political communication (Castells, 2007; Huggins, 2001; Pole, 2010).Yin argues that case study "would be the preferred method, compared to the others, in situations when (1) the main research questions are 'how' or 'why' questions; (2) a researcher has little or no control over behavioral events; and (3) the focus of study

is a contemporary (as opposed to entirely historical) phenomenon" (p. 3). It is obvious

that this research would benefit from case studies, as my research questions tend to

explore how elites construct and transform their identities in contemporary culture with

digital communication, and I have no control over how various social groups perform

themselves and communicate with others online or offline. Therefore, case study will be

one of the primary methods applied in my research. For instance, in chapter 5, the case of

Xuriyanggang will be looked into specifically when examining how the boundaries

between elites' identity and ordinary people's are being crossed, how Xuriyanggang

consciously or unconsciously enact the transformation of their identities, and how

mainstream media, ordinary people, and other social forces collectively contribute to

such a typical identity transformation in China. Incidents like this have been emerging

with great speed and number in the digital era, hence catching the most significant

moments will be a central requirement for this research. Many scholars view case study

research as more than a single method. Simons (2009) defines case study as "an in-depth

exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular

project, policy, institution, program, or system in a 'real life' context" (p. 21). According

to her, case study is more like a collectivity of various methods that work towards

theories and explanations of "real life." Following this line, Thomas (2011), when

exploring the typology of case studies, sees case studies as "analyses of persons, events,

decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied

holistically by one or more methods" (p. 513). And usually the case under investigation

"will be an instance of a class of phenomena that provides an analytical frame—an

object—within which the study is conducted and which the case illuminates and

explicates" (p. 513). In my analyses of systems of persons and social groups, I incorporate some other methods to enhance my case study research. As this research is not as much about "real life," but about how people interact and construct social realities in a virtual space, other methods help me handle and understand online texts and their social meanings and ramifications. I use archive studies to determine the timeline of a certain incident and catch crucial moments. I created my *weibo* account in November 2009, and started to actively observe people and stories, especially those that have potential power to influence others and the society. I spend on average 2 to 4 hours every day on *weibo*, using both my laptop and cell phone. Since January 2010, I have been recording "top *weibo* topics (in the past 24 hours)" as reported by *weibo* on its home page on a daily basis, in order to capture those critical moments of breaking story or someone immediately attracting public attention and becoming a web celebrity. My archive is divided up by months, and each document has 20 to 31 entries. Each entry is composed of the time of data retrieval, the titles of the top 10 *weibo* topics, the *weibo* accounts that created these topics, and their categories as distinguished by *sina*, for example, "social incidents," or "entertainment." Sometimes one topic can occupy the top list for a long time, like the 2012 Olympics. More interestingly, by comparing top stories day by day, I am able to spot the moments when a social incident breaks out, and everyone starts to participate in watching and discussing it. This could help reveal how the construction of someone's identity has unfolded within the development of a certain story.

To better examine each case study in my discussion, I will apply another important method: Critical Discourse Analysis, or CDA. CDA originates from Critical Linguistics, with Kress (1985), Fairclough (2015), Wodak (1989), van Dijk (1991), van

Leeuwen (1996) and some others as key figures. While Critical Linguistics "sought to show how language and grammar can be used as ideological instruments" (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 4), CDA adds more emphasis on the interrelation between language, power, ideology, and social change. Fairclough's work *Language and Power* (2015) is considered one of the classics for CDA. To him, discourse is "the language aspects of social practices in which language variation is socially controlled", and it "make(s) the link between the text and other elements of the social, between the internal relations of the text and its external relations" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 37). Fairclough views discourse as "a relational view of language" (p. 4), the central objective of CDA as "analyzing and critiquing relations between discourse and power" (p. 26), and the essence of his version of CDA resides in three stages: *critique-explanation-action*. He defines CDA as "*normative critique* of discourse, leading to *explanatory critique* of relations between discourse and other social elements of the existing social reality, as a basis for *action* to change reality for the better" (p. 48). The three-stage analysis is, according to Fairclough, what differentiates CDA from other forms of critical analysis, "(b)ecause what drives CDA (as part of critical social science) is the aim of changing existing societies for the better, and to do that we need a good understanding of them, including how discourse figures within them" (p. 6). Therefore, instead of focusing too much on dialogue with discourse participants, Fairclough sees CDA more as "a critical social scientific explanation of relations between discourse and other social elements, to a dialogue with social actors engaged in transformative action (praxis)" (p. 11).

Though there is a long tradition in media and cultural studies of examining meaning production in image and other visual communication, it wasn't until the late

1990s that this approach got first introduced in CDA. And in the new century, more linguists "began to look at how language, image and other modes of communication, such as toys, monuments, films, sounds, etc., combine to make meaning" (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 1). Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) specifically look at how color plays an equally critical role in meaning production as language does, and thus reinforce the idea that multimodal discourse analysis is of great significance to examining communicative processes. They argue for a "move towards a view of multimodality in which common semiotic principles operate in and across different modes, and in which it is therefore quite possible for music to encode action, or images to encode emotion" (p. 2). Following this idea, meaning is produced not once and in one design, but rather "in any and every sign, at every level, and in any mode" (p. 4). Therefore, examining more layers of articulation and discourse production discovers more layers of meaning. Machin and Mayr argue that "what this kind of visual multimodal analysis can also offer Media and Cultural studies is a more precise set of tools that, like those offered for the analysis of language, encourage more systematic analysis of (media) texts" (p. 2). They call this Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), by which they "seek to 'denaturalise' representations on other modes of communication" (p. 9), and try to "reveal the kinds of ideas, absences and taken-for granted assumptions in the images as well as the texts which will also serve the ends of revealing the kinds of power interests buried in them" (p. 10). In my research, I will also pay special attention to communication genres other than plain texts online. A movie star could post a picture of his professional calligraphy to build up his reputation not only as someone who knows how to act, but also as someone who is well-educated, or quite cultivated. A remix video that satirizes a social incident in

a funny and timely way could bring its author from nobody to someone well-known and politically sensitive, or even possibly into the elite circle. These forms of communication have great significance, as Machin and Mayr state: "MCDA views other modes of communication as a means of social construction. Visual communication, as well as language, both *shapes* and *is shaped by* society" (p. 10).

One thing that has attracted many scholars' attention is whether CDA is good to use in the Chinese context. In his introduction, Fairclough (2015) specifically responds to Blommaert's (2005) criticism of CDA's universal validity, namely the assumption that CDA is universally applicable to every part of the world. Fairclough does admit that his version of CDA originates in, and mostly deals with, Britain and similar countries, but he never assumes that CDA could apply to other cultures without any change. It is of course important to take into consideration specific social realities, which CDA is shaped within and continues to bring change to. Fairclough thinks it is indeed important to think whether, and how, CDA could be of help in examining other cultures, including China. And he thinks the answer is yes (Fairclough, 2016, p. 26). Fairclough does not really payas much attention to China as some other scholars do, however. By examining the differences between Western and Chinese traditions of understanding the concept of criticism or critique, Tian and Chilton (2014) argue that CDA, as a methodology originating in the West and with strong political commitment, "needs some tailoring and appropriating when being applied in China" (p. 197). They refer to Tian's previous works (2008, 2009) to propose a "wider angle" critical perspective for CDA in Chinese studies. By "wider angle," Tian is indeed borrowing terms from geometry.

> In Tian's (2008, 2009) proposal, the 'acute angle' is metaphorically referred to the Western CDA, as it is 'sharp' in the sense of criticizing the undesired social

problems and of bringing about social change. In the same way, the 'obtuse angle' is metaphorically referred to the newly proposed critical perspective on discourse analysis, which is not so ambitious as the Western CDA in its emphasis of political commitment but milder in the sense that the 'wider angle' critical perspective of CDA aims to understand the workings and functions of discourses in the socio-political transformations, that is, to understand how discourse works to construct and represent social realities in the complex of societal contest. (Tian & Chilton, 2014, pp. 198-199)

A "wider angle" of discourse analysis with a critical perspective better fits into a Chinese context, since terms like freedom of expression, public sphere, or political transformation all bear very different social understandings from their Western context. Tian & Chilton (2014) claim that CDA's political application in Chinese studies is somewhat limited; therefore, a critical perspective in analyzing discourse around social transformations will get more out of China. And this not only inspires my research in regards of methodology, but also, to a greater end, guides my overall understanding of China and its contemporary social and political culture. One main difference between CDA and other methods in social science is that "the notion of context is crucial for CDA, since this explicitly includes social-psychological, political and ideological components and thereby postulates an interdisciplinary procedure" (Meyer, 2001, p. 15). Following this line, Meyer looks at the relationship between language and society in CDA not as a determining one, but as a mediating one. It is the mediation between language and society that CDA aims to interpret. In my research, I will emphasize the importance of *context* when interpreting Chinese media. I will examine elite discourse as a fluid process, rather than a fixed material, in that it mediates social realities from various angles. This will better capture local characteristics that help elite identity grow in society, and hence paint a bigger picture of how politics, arts, education, entertainment production, etc., all contribute to the formation of elite culture in China.

Some scholars, including Slembrouck (2001), have questioned whether CDA, especially Fairclough's version of CDA, tends to mute the voices of discourse participants, or deny their agency. To clarify, Fairclough (2015) specifically analyzes how CDA could engage participants' critique and explanation of discourse in the discussion, and finally how social actors, including discourse participants, are important in bringing about social change. This confirms my interest in acknowledging and individuals' subjectivity in this research, as only through communicating with various social groups, both online and offline, can we get a comprehensive picture of elite construction in China. Therefore, the last, but not the least, important method for this research is online participant observation. As a matter of fact, "Wodak postulates that CDA studies always incorporate fieldwork and ethnography in order to explore the object under investigation as a precondition for any further analysis and theorizing" (Meyer, 2001, p. 24). I won't call my research an ethnographic one, though I do hope to incorporate more ethnographic methods like interviews in my future research. But I agree with Wodak that it is important to understand objects' subjectivity before generalizing any theories from my case studies. And one thing crucial for me when examining subjectivities is to pick an appropriate site for observing identity formation and interpersonal interactions. Activities on social networking sites, especially microblogging practices, have generated enormous possibilities and changes in interactions among various social groups. Microblogs, or *weibo* in Chinese, are now widely accepted by Chinese citizens. But their growth in China wasn't always smooth and easy. It wasn't until Twitter grew popular in the West that domestic social networking sites that function like Twitter began to develop in China. With unique features such as convenient linking

to news reports, images, and videos, as well as rapid dissemination among a huge number of people, microblogs automatically provided a very comfortable public platform for young technological experts, professional journalists, and social activists in China. Therefore, microblogs in China seemed to be born with special social and political implications and significance. In 2007 and 2008, more than five microblogs were created in China, with *fanfou*[1], *jiwai*[2], and *digu*[3] as leading sites. The names of these microblogs implicate their purpose of creating an online platform for the Chinese to express what they have to say freely in public. They soon became a place for digital activism to emerge and prosper in China. In July 2009, after the Xinjiang incident in China, these microblog services encountered the most severe censorship, and were soon shut down by the Chinese government, together with Twitter.

Nevertheless, microblogs did not stop developing in China. Since 2009, several other microblog websites have emerged in China, including nongovernmental Twitter affiliations, *Twitese*, and official websites like *sina microblog*. Now, due to its leading role in Chinese social networking sites, when referring to *weibo* in Chinese, people would assume that we are talking about *sina microblog*, rather than any other microblog sites. For this reason, this research will also use *weibo*, the better acknowledged name, when referring to *sina microblog*. *Weibo* is operated by the popular portal website, *sina*. It was launched in August 2009, and soon became the biggest and most influential site among all the domestic microblog services. It attracts not only ordinary people, but also social

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[1] In Chinese, "饭否", meaning, "have you eaten yet?" The question is a common way Chinese people greet each other, especially decades ago.
[2] In Chinese, "叽歪", meaning "to speak continuously and annoyingly."
[3] In Chinese, "嘀咕", meaning "to speak in low and indistinct tones."

elites, such as popular stars, business giants, and journalists. *Weibo* introduces itself on its website as following:

> *Sina weibo* is a leading social networking site for you to produce, share, and discover Chinese content. *Sina weibo* not only provides a platform for you to socialize with others by publishing your opinions in real time, but also makes it easier to collect, form, and disseminate information. Any user can create and publish microblogs with no more than 140 Chinese characters, added with multi-media or longer content as attachment. Your relationship with others on *sina weibo* can be asymmetric, for that anyone can choose to follow anyone else, or to comment on or republish anyone else's words. It is its simple, asymmetric, and fragmental feature that makes original microblogs become dialogue flows with viral distribution potential. (*Sina* technology, 2016, March 3 b, p. 2)

Though some claim or predict that with newer social networking sites and apps emerging, such as *WeChat*, Chinese people are gradually stepping away from *weibo*, *weibo*'s earnings report on the fourth quarter of 2015 clearly shows that it maintains a fast increase in terms of its number of users, users' degree of activity, and *weibo*'s revenue (*Sina* technology, 2016, March 3 a, p. 1). According to the report, by the end of the fourth quarter of 2015, the number of active users within a month on *weibo* had reached 236 million, with an increase of 34%; the number of active users within a day on *weibo* had reached 106 million, with an increase of 32%. Image 7 shows the gradual increase in active users quarter by quarter in the past two years. Corresponding to such an impressive growth, the total revenue of *weibo* in the fourth quarter reached $149,000,000, with a huge increase of 258% (*Sina* technology, 2016, March 3 a, p. 1).

Besides the general acceptance of *weibo*, several reasons make me choose it (instead of its competitors, especially Tencent Microblog) as the primary online site for this research. First, in comparable cases, the number of followers and posts on *weibo* are always significantly more than those on other sites. Take one of my case studies, the online campaign to rescue abducted children in 2011, for example, which was initiated by

several intellectuals on multiple websites to call on people to take pictures of child

微博月活跃用户增长（单位：万）
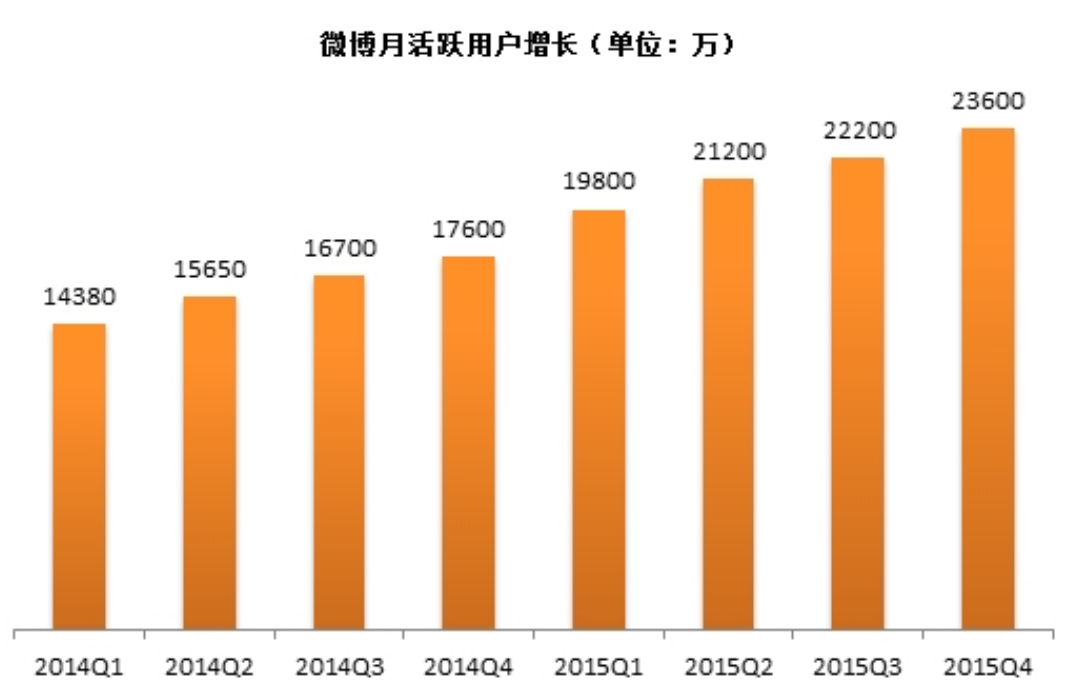
Image 7 Increase of active *weibo* users month by month

(*Sina* technology, 2016, March 3 a, p. 1)

beggars on streets and post them online, with the hope that their parents or relatives would recognize them and get them home with the help of officials. By 5am, May 9, 2011 (Beijing time), the campaign account on *weibo* had gotten 230,728 followers and 4373 posts (numbers retrieved from http://t.sina.com.cn/jiejiuqier), while its twin brother on Tencent Microblog only had 104,471 followers and 136 tweets (numbers retrieved from http://t.qq.com/yujianrongbj). Second, *sina*, as a popular domestic portal site, has always played a leading role in developing new web genres and applications in China. In particular, the promoting strategies of *weibo* have revealed a great deal of how digital technologies could be important in directing public opinion, such as the functions that rank top users and select possible interesting topics for regular users. Third, and most

crucially, *sina* is one of the sites that have maintained a stable relationship with citizens, social elites, and most importantly, the government. With all these characteristics, *weibo* becomes a great candidate for an empirical site to investigate how digital activism could develop in China to negotiate among ordinary people, social elites, and the government.

So my participant observation mostly takes place on *weibo*. I will participate in daily random interactions with *weibo* users, both elites and ordinary citizens, to observe what ordinary people view as differences between elites and themselves, what reactions ordinary people usually have when "talking" with elites, what topics most raise public attention, what languages elites choose in their posts, and what language ordinary users use when following elites' opinions. Following van Dijk's (2001) "discourse-cognition-society triangle" (though van Dijk specifically claims that he doesn't want anyone to 'follow' him, as this basically denies any critical attitude in research, especially in research conducted with CDA (p. 95)), I will pick out some online texts—including words, images, videos, etc.—that emerge from the public discussions around my case studies, to analyze what topics are literally conveyed from these texts, what context hides behind these texts and promotes them to popularity, and what social implications are generated within the discourse structure. I will also pay attention to the missing parts of the texts, namely the discourse that people consciously or unconsciously choose to avoid or omit, and more importantly, the social, political, and cultural structures behind such choices.

One last thing I need to address here is an important theme to pay special attention to: the boundary-crossing moments between ordinary people and elites. I will try to spot the incidents that would be most likely to make someone become a superstar

overnight, to examine what marks the ultimate boundary-crossing moment, what characterizes someone as elite instead of ordinary people, what they do right after the boundary is crossed, and how they adjust to multiple identifications on one site. To believe in the mobility of elites does not mean that I take no consideration of other administrative forces in digital media. Not to mention government regulation, the fact that issues in favor of mainstream tastes are most likely to be circulated online reminds us of the disparities between users (Meyer, 2002, p. xvi).Yet, as I have emphasized before, to do research on elites, we have to firstly acknowledge that "elite" is never a fixed identity. Rather, it is collectively and gradually constructed within a fluid continuum, within the social realities. In the next chapters, I will use multiple case studies to explore this complex picture of elites' identity construction in China's digital communication, with special attention on discourse analysis and participant observation.

CHAPTER 4

CONSTRUCTION OF ELITES' IDENTITIES

Sina has a long tradition of promoting celebrities on its sites. It first implemented the strategy of recruiting people well-known to open accounts on its sites with the expectation that more people would follow to join. In July 2005, *sina* launched its blog site, with many other competitors, such as Tencent Blog, emerging around the same time and competing to recruit as many users as possible. Only two months after opening, the chief editor of *sina blog*, Tong Chen, thought of inviting celebrities to write online, and this has brought incredible gains for both *sina* and China's media environment as a whole. By the end of 2005, *sina* reported that the movie actress Jinglei Xu's blog had reached a total number of 4,000,000 visits, which marked a new record of blog visits in China. And this happened only within three months after Xu's debut on *sina blog*. *Sina blog* made history in only 3 months in a way that many other blogs couldn't have accomplished in 30 months. This of course wouldn't have happened either without the help of Xu and her team, and some other active celebrities who contributed enormously in attracting people to open accounts on *sina blog*. The first celebrity that *sina blog* invited was Hua Yu, a famous Chinese avant-garde novelist. His appearance on *sina blog* not only excited a huge group of young college students, who were readers and fans of Yu, but also encouraged *sina blog* to play the celebrity card to compete for more users. And they soon found that some users, who were not really well-known to Chinese people, could contribute even more to the growth of *sina blog*, as their blogs gradually became some of the most popular ones simply because of the contents they published online. *Sina* also listed those names in their "Hall of Fame," which promotes the most popular active blog users on the very first page on *sina blog*. It was such a smart move that ordinary people

started to understand *sina blog* more as a place created for the ordinary, yet shared and appreciated by both ordinary people and celebrities who had always been unreachable in the social structure.

The year 2005 was not only a magical year for blog sites to prosper in China, but also a crucial one that witnessed the invention and growth of *sina*'s celebrity strategy, which was soon copied by other portal sites in China. The first groups of celebrities that *sina* and other blogs showed interest in were people like the novelist Hua Yu. They were authors, journalists, economists, singers; they were young, and they were good at writing. This is of course a result of the nature of blogging. Good writing that can speak to and speak for the young generation is the key to attract clicks and comments. But *sina*'s microblog, *weibo*, opens a whole new world for us, one in which everybody can write, and write well, in such a way that ordinary people's online writing would possibly attract more followers than the most popular intellectuals in China. What has remained the same on *weibo* is *sina*'s continuous enthusiasm in reaching out to celebrities. But the relationship between celebrities and ordinary users has changed; hence, the way they view each other and themselves has changed, too. In the era of blogs, the relationship was relatively rigid, and the concept of *elite* was still to a large extent restricted to the celebrity circle. The era of *weibo* has started a more flexible process of writing and reading, a more powerful way to invite anyone into the elite circle. This elite circle is no longer only controlled by the names that are already well-accepted in the society, but also newly emerged professionals in all kinds of areas, including journalists, government officials, scholars, and social activists. One doesn't have to put as much effort into making him or herself an excellent professional to be an elite online. Quite interestingly,

weibo has opened up a platform for ordinary people to articulate and promote themselves in public, which would in turn make them "good" at their own professions.

So *weibo* has depicted for us a complicated picture of identity-making and transformation on the part of people from every level of the social hierarchy. And the whole process has unfolded many more possibilities for social change. To start, the question this chapter asks is: How do elites construct their identities in the social structure with help of *weibo*? Apparently, as Bourdieu introduces social capital "as metaphor for power relations and for playing a crucial role in identity formation" (Manning, 2015, p. 55), it is helpful to start by examining social capital in the digital network.

As elaborated in previous chapters, social capital, as a theoretical concept, derives from various disciplines, and has developed with many schools of thought since the late 1970s. While different scholars have their own (political) agenda in proposing and using this term, hence put different emphasis on some key concepts including power, ideology, trust, norm, network, activities, and so on, it is not hard to see that all of them would agree upon the idea that social capital is a **resource** within a **network** that has the potential to enable **collective action**. Lin (2001) identifies a convergence of social resources and social capital theories, and he states that such a convergence "complements and strengthens the development of a social theory focusing on the instrumental utility of accessed and mobilized resources embedded in social networks" (p. 81). Accordingly, in Lin's research on the relationship between social resources and status attainment, he implements two models: one is called *accessed social capital model*, the other *mobilized social capital model*. (p. 82) *Accessed social capital model* examines the process of access to social capital, which is "resources accessed in the ego's general social

networks," including human capital, initial position, and social ties(p. 82).*Mobilized social capital model* examines "the use of social contacts and the resources provided by the contact" (p. 82), and Lin argues that *accessed* and *mobilized social capital* work together to exert a significant effect on social status attainment. Image 8 shows how Lin synthesizes both models in one system to work together in achieving a certain social status. Apparently, the first column identifies *accessed social capital*, within which one's *education*, *initial status*, and *extensity of ties* all have positive effects on *network resources*, which in turn help obtain higher social statuses. *Network resources* extend into the second column, where *mobilized social capital* resides. After analyzing data of job hunting experiences from different parts of the world, Lin concludes that "the overall effect of the tie strength between ego and the helper on the helper's status was insignificant," and "strength of ties (measured by the intensity of the relationship between ego and the contact) had no effect on contact statuses or on attained occupational status and income" (p. 87). Though my research findings won't necessarily agree with Lin's conclusion, this chapter will utilize Lin's idea of *accessed* and *mobilized social capital* models to analyze how elites construct their identities online in China.

One primary difference between my study and Lin's (2001) is that Lin, though also using China as one of his sites, mainly deals with the physical society. I will start from cyberspace, and mostly look into virtual resources and exchanges. So, one of the modifications I would like to make on Lin's model is to specifically investigate digital capital, or the digital representations of social capital. For example, when examining how an actor's education affects his elite status, I will not only check how big a role his college diploma, and the reputation of his college, play in his status attainment, but also

how he identifies where he graduates from on his online profile, or how he incorporates

his level of education in his online writing. By examining online activities of typical

weibo users around a famous online campaign for abducted children, this chapter

willborrow Lin's *accessed social capital model* and *mobilized social capital model* to see

how elite status is attained and maintained by people from different social groups.

"Raise your hand, rescue a child"

In the evening of January 25, 2011, Jianrong Yu, a human rights activist and
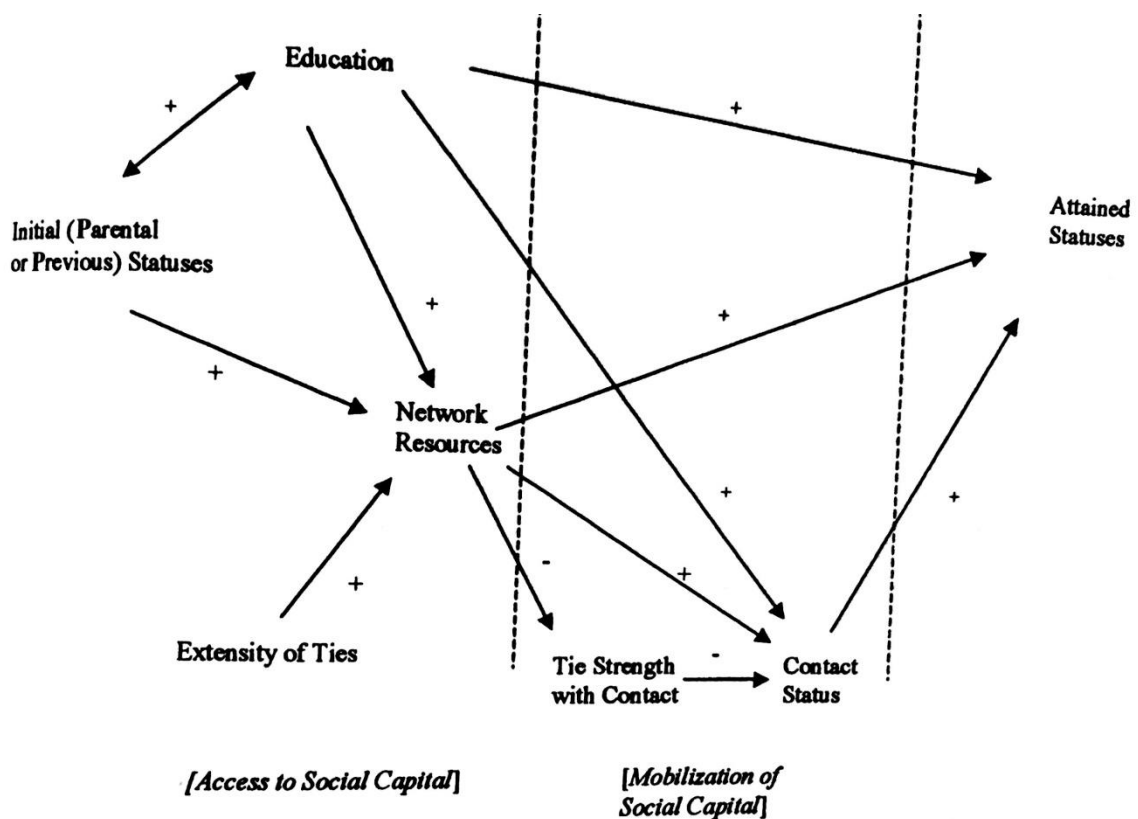
Figure 6.1 The social capital model of status attainment.

Image 8 Lin's (2001) social capital model of status attainment (p. 83)

professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Science, created a *weibo* account to initiate

an online campaign to rescue abducted children in China. The very first *weibo* post reads:

This is the official *weibo* for "Raise Your Hand, Rescue a Child," initiated by
@Jianrong Yu. I hope you would take pictures or videos when seeing children

begging on streets, upload them to your own *weibo* and @ this account. Or you may send private messages to this account or the email address for this campaign: jiejiuqier@sina.com. Please follow this campaign and make it big. (Yu, 2011, January 25)

The simple post rapidly got huge public attention, and pictures of begging kids started to appear from every corner of China, on *weibo* and all over the Internet. By January 29, it had gotten more than 100 pictures of child beggars, and 8,000 *weibo* followers, including Shiqu Chen, director of China's Anti-Abduction Division of Ministry of Public Security, who later became another important figure in this online campaign. Suddenly, everyone's *weibo* page became filled with random pictures of children taken on streets, especially child beggars. The below image is just one example of what ordinary *weibo* users were seeing each day when they opened their *weibo* pages. Everyone actively or passively learned about this online campaign just by scrolling down *weibo* pages as always. And the name Jianrong Yu was accepted by hundreds of thousands of Chinese citizens as an accountable public intellectual who really cared about the underprivileged of society. People admired Yu for bravely initiating this meaningful online campaign that could possibly save kids and their families. On February 3, One Foundation (also called Red Cross Society of China Jet Li One Foundation Project) announced it would help this online campaign by building a database. Shiqu Chen, as the representative of government officials in this campaign, also announced that they would welcome any source of information on child abduction and human trafficking, and promised that they would actively investigate each single case. On February 8, 2011, a famous female singer, Hong Han, who is also a member of the National Committee of the CPPCC and NPC, claimed to start preparing a proposal to protect (abducted) children for the coming annual session of National People's Congress (NPC) and CPPCC in March

2011. This marked an important moment when the public started to call for governmental

attention to children, especially those from underprivileged families who needed more

protection from the government.

Image 9 One post from the online campaign of "Raise Your Hand, Rescue a Child"
(Retrieved from http://weibo.com/jiejiuqier?is_all=1&stat_date=201101#feedtop, August
22, 2016)

At the same time, problems occurred when offline participation took place as a

subsequent result of this online campaign. Perhaps it was beyond everyone's expectations

that *weibo* could have such great power in disseminating information and mobilizing

people. Too many people were directing their cell phones and cameras on the poor

homeless on streets, without thinking about any possible negative effects on the poor. In

the morning of February 9, 2011, after the official announcement of the Police

Department of Shanxi Division in support of this anti-abduction campaign, local police

and journalists began to investigate child beggars on streets. When the team, holding

recorders and cameras, approached a woman begging with two young children, the woman suddenly threw her pot on the ground to express her anger. It looked like she had had enough of people taking pictures of her and her children. By the end, after the police's close investigation, it turned out that the woman was indeed the two children's biological mother. There was no abduction involved, as people assumed (Reflection: The gain and loss of "microblogging anti-abduction," 2011, February 17). Cases like this made Jianrong Yu and other primary advocates of this online campaign rethink the whole picture. They soon redesigned the online campaign into "rescuing child beggars," instead of abducted children, in order to avoid labeling those poor kids as being abducted before this was proven by the police department. On February 14, 2011, Jianrong Yu and his team created an official blog on *sina* (http://blog.sina.com.cn/u/1930277760) to support the online campaign. The following day, a blog post titled "Tentative Proposal for NPC and CPPCC to Forbid Children Begging" (2011, February 15) appeared online, and soon sparked a fierce debate. Since then, the distinction between *anti-abduction* and *anti-child begging* became an reason for citizens to hold back their positive attitudes towards this online campaign a little bit.[4] Although as reported, "in three weeks, more than 220,000 people joined the campaign, six missing children have been found, and one family has been reunited" (Microblogs save abducted children, 2011, paragraph 4), people began to raise legal, moral, and social concerns about this online campaign. Some were wondering whether this kind of activity would put child beggars into more danger. Some were asking for more effort from the government's end to implement effective regulation and legislation to really punish human trafficking and protect children. Some were more

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[4] Basic timeline for the online campaign provided by "Special Issue on NPC & CPPCC: Anti-abduction on *weibo*" on *163 news*, retrieved from http://news.163.com/special/weibodaguai/

concerned for the privacy of those children, who were not abducted, but still had to beg

with parents and relatives to survive (Beaton, 2011, paragraph 7). There are obviously

good reasons to take legal and moral concerns into consideration before taking and

publishing a private picture of a child online. Despite all the critiques and problems, the

online campaign had indeed raised a huge amount of public attention and governmental

attention on children's rights. The *weibo* account Yu created is still actively posting and

reposting relevant pictures and information. The number of followers is still increasing,

though not as rapidly as before. More importantly, this single online campaign has raised

Chinese citizens' awareness and enthusiasm for utilizing *weibo*, through prompting them

to contribute their own efforts in collectively helping abducted children to reunite with

their parents. And *weibo* has thus become a host for many other associations to create

online groups and campaigns for similar actions. Amazingly, starting from there, *weibo*

has shown great potential in mobilizing people around charity works. It has now even

created a sub-product, *wei charity*, which is a platform for people to initiate charity

proposals that do not target anything huge, but have the ability to engage as many people

as possible to contribute to meaningful results. It is not hard to see the significance of the

role elites have played in promoting *weibo* in such a direction. In fact, it is not only a

process of promoting *weibo* as a tool for political consciousness, social actions and

changes, but also a process of building up individuals' reputation and a group's collective

identity in the social structure.

It is agreed in social capital theories that relationships within a network are

maintained with the help of reciprocal expectation and exchanges. Seemingly negative,

"according to Coleman, social interaction and cooperation should be interpreted as forms

of exchange motivated by self-interest" (Manning, 2015, p. 58). Though collaboration

doesn't seem to be in favor of one's interest in the short term, an individual may still

choose to act as expected "on the instrumental assumption that the longer term pay-off is

in all probability going to be more rewarding" (Manning, 2015, p. 58). Apparently, norms,

reciprocity, and trust are all vital to a network that is rich in social capital. Putnam (2000)

defines social capital as such:

> Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals— social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called 'civic virtue'. The difference is that 'social capital' calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not rich in social capital. (p. 19)

Therefore, an important question for this study is to ask how "the norms of reciprocity

and trustworthiness" arise from the social network, namely *weibo*. For Bourdieu, both

material exchange and symbolic exchange contribute to the process of building up a

social network and accumulating social capital and sustaining mutual relationships within

this network. In the cyberspace of *weibo*, material exchange is limited, or digitized, while

symbolic exchange plays a greater role in connecting people in a virtual way. It is due to

this reason that digital capital seems to better serve my research agenda than social

capital in general. Therefore, inspired by Lin's (2001) research models, the following

discussion will explore elites' identity construction on *weibo* using an *accessed digital

capital model* and a *mobilized digital capital model*, by analyzing how some key figures

acquired and maintained their elite statuses in the anti-abduction online campaign.

Accessed digital capital model

To get a more comprehensive understanding of how different people contribute to the social construction of power dynamics, I would like to start by examining relative social groups. In this online campaign, a few active participants from various relative social groups contributed tremendously in writing and telling the story, as well as in constructing their own and each other's social identities. Some of the most significant social groups include public intellectuals, government officials, and celebrities. By analyzing representatives from each group, this section tries to spot the most essential characteristics that mark someone as elite, and how they access and generate digital capital to attain higher social status.

Jianrong Yu, the person who posted the first microblog on *weibo* and initiated this online campaign, is undoubtedly one of the most important figures in this social incident. The whole idea of rescuing abducted children by engaging people online didn't come out of nowhere. On January 17, 2011, a desperate mother, whose son was missing, sent an online message to Yu asking him to help post her son's information on *weibo*, so that more people would be aware of it. After Yu posted about this poor family online, the story quickly grabbed much attention, with some people even providing pictures of boys they saw on streets who looked very like the missing boy. Seeing the positive effect of this single tweet from Yu, other families whose children were missing started to contact Yu for help. Yu soon realized how powerful *weibo* could be if better utilized. Therefore, on January 25, he started the new *weibo* account specifically for the rescue of abducted children, and posted that very first tweet. In roughly two weeks, this new account attracted more than 50,000 followers, with a few hundred pictures posted, both from

families with missing children, and from ordinary *weibo* users who took pictures of child

beggars on streets.

The poor woman who had been desperately looking for her child didn't pick Yu

for help randomly. She clearly picked Yu for his established reputation in social activities,

and more importantly, the great amount of digital capital he had access to. Yu, as a

professor of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has a doctorate degree that only a

small group of people of his age have achieved in China. He has been actively doing field

work in rural China and published hundreds of books and articles on China's rural

development. With no doubt, Yu represents a small group of scholars in China who have

enjoyed the highest level of education, and more importantly, who have been showing

great sympathy towards underprivileged social groups. According to Lin's (2001) model,

higher education boosts one's capacity to access network resources, which in turn

enhances one's chance to attain higher social status. Yu's doctorate degree and research

accomplishments have also promoted his "initial status" to a higher level than most

ordinary *weibo* users. Here, I am borrowing Lin's term of "initial status," not to refer to

parental or previous status in the physical world as Lin claims (p. 83), but to refer to

one's initial social status on *weibo*, the virtual status. When he first created his *weibo*

account in 2010, Yu introduced himself as "Professor at Chinese Academy of Social

Sciences" in the column to the left of his *weibo* posts, where people can directly find out

who a*weibo*account belongs to. This introduction, though in very small font and only

consisting of 9 characters, defines Yu as someone from the upper level of the social

hierarchy, and as a cultural elite who at least does better academic research. Right above

this line of introduction in the same column lists Yu's location asBeijing, and date of

birth as September 1, 1962. This information indicates a middle-age male living in the capital of China, which represents a perfect initial status that ensures Yu the most power in Chinese society.

However, this set of information alone wouldn't have guaranteed Yu the good reputation he has achieved. The way he presents himself on *weibo* makes him a responsible public intellectual, whose image goes along with Chinese citizens' expectations for a social elite. Image 2 below shows what we see first by clicking on Yu's *weibo* page. Unlike most ordinary users, as seen right in the middle of the upper page, Yu uses his real name as his *weibo* account name, which is also what many celebrities would do. This is a simple statement of who owns this account, and whose opinions this account conveys. A brief self-introduction below his name reads, "Director, Social Issues Research Center, Department of Rural Development, and Chinese Academy of Social Sciences." This short introduction is indeed powerful, as it states what Yu is interested in, and what he is capable of. Whoever reads this line would expect to read on Yu's *weibo* page more about critical social problems and cultural phenomena rather than plain jokes or celebrity affairs. Right above Yu's name is his profile picture zoomed in to fit in a small circle. In the picture, Yu wears a casual blue coat and a pair of glasses with black frames, and takes a seated position in the left bottom corner of the circle with an expression suggesting he is deep in thought. Behind him is a big poster of a portrait of an old woman, whose face occupies the major part of this profile picture. This is clearly a woman from a rural area in China. Her face is dark and full of wrinkles. Her hair is wrapped in a big white cloth, like what a peasant usually does. Her lips are closed tightly.

Her eyes look straight into you, tearfully. By sitting in front of this poster, Yu looks like

Image 10 Yu's *weibo* page with profile picture (Retrieved from
http://weibo.com/yujianrong?refer_flag=1001030103_, August 22, 2016)

the woman's spokesperson, or the spokesperson of hundreds of thousands of people like

this old woman. Thus, people who are interested in China's rural development and

related social issues like environmental problems and human rights tend to more easily

have confidence in Yu to really speak up for those who are treated unfairly in the society.

Yu's profile picture only shows part of the poster of the old woman. A set of his

posts on people mistreated by the justice system in China reveal that what's cut out of the

circle shaped profile picture is a big black Chinese character written on the old woman's

hair wrap (see Image 11). The character, *yuan* (冤), meaning injustice, is written by hand

on the white cloth. Interestingly, one of the strokes is actually written in a slightly

incorrect way. Very likely, someone with limited education wrote it, and the poor woman

wrapped it over her head to convey her sorrow and anger. This character is such a strong

statement that it makes one immediately think about how policymakers in China neglect

于建嵘 V

2010-10-14 15:14 来自 微博 weibo.com

我的兄弟姐妹：王秀枝，汉，1955年生，河北省廊坊人，1988年因认为公安机关办事不力上访，被多次拘留，1999年和2002年分别被劳动教养共计四年。

☆ 收藏   ⤴ 54   ⊟ 37   👍 赞
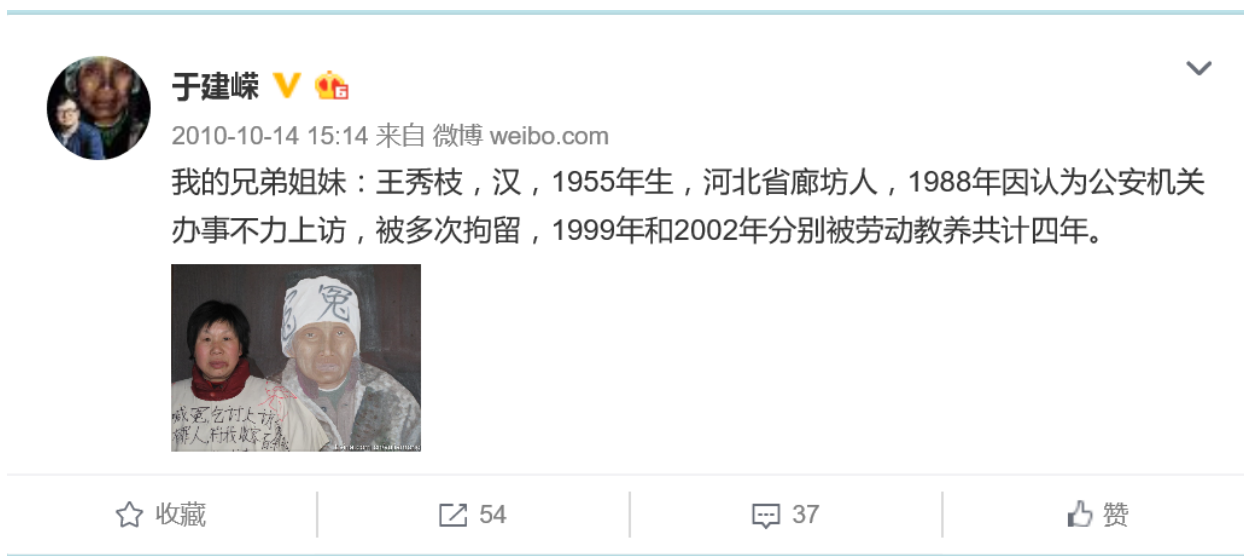
Image 11 Yu's post with whole picture of the woman in profile picture (Retrieved from http://weibo.com/yujianrong?is_all=1&stat_date=201010&page=3#feedtop, August 22, 2016)

the needs of the underprivileged, and what the government should do to prevent the

underprivileged from being harmed over and over again. By cutting this character out of

his profile picture, Yu has adopted a middle ground of bringing up critical and even

sensitive issues for public discussion, while not criticizing the government in a

straightforward way. Accordingly, nearly all his *weibo* posts implicate his interest in

solving real problems for those who have been treated unfairly but had no way to speak

up, but he never uses harsh words to directly blame the government, like many other

human activists would do. Consequently, as a scholar, Yu has been constantly invited to

give lectures for government officials around all over the country, to lead them into

discussions they wouldn't have participated in otherwise. As the background of his *weibo*

page shows, what Yu hopes and fights for is people walking in peace on green grass and

under a clear blue sky, with dandelion seeds flying in the air. It's a safe and pleasant life

that every Chinese dreams of. With his *weibo* account, Yu has successfully found a middle ground between ordinary people and the government in Chinese society, and gradually built up his elite social status. In 2010, Yu was voted by Chinese netizens as one of the nine "most important public intellectuals in China," as recognition of his continuous attention to underprivileged Chinese, and efforts to talk with them as well as to governments and scholars for them. As of April 2016, Yu has acquired more than 2,018,000 followers on *weibo*, among whom we can find people from various social groups. This number alone indicates the high level of extensity of social ties that Yu possesses in accumulating digital capital, which in turn helps him attain higher social status.

If we look more closely into Yu's profile picture, we see an orange "V" marked at the right bottom corner. This "V" indicates Yu as a VIP user of *sina weibo*, which means he is verified as someone with certain social influence in public. But this doesn't give him any priority or extra functionality on *weibo* compared to other ordinary users. The only privilege Yu has with the orange "V" is others' trust in him as being Yu himself, because the orange "V" is only available to those who have requested and passed the identity verification from *sina*. As *sina* states, the purpose of the verification is to avoid confusion of identity and misunderstanding among the public. Through being verified, the elite "would get more credibility, more followers, and more impact" (How to Apply for *Sina* Elite Verification, 2010, June 10). This confirms Bourdieu's (1986) emphasis on "title" in talking about cultural and social capital. Bourdieu insists that cultural capital is incorporated in one's title, which in turn ensures social capital. With strong cultural and social capital combined, we can expect individual or collective actions to take place. The

verification system provided by *sina* is a process to title someone, to institutionalize one's

social capital into norms. *Sina* lists four groups of people who are qualified to request

verification. First, those who have considerable impact and recognition in certain fields;

second, well-known corporations, organizations, universities, media institutions and their

managing officials; third, important journalists; fourth, famous figures in acting, arts,

sports etc. (How to Apply for *Sina* Elite Verification, 2010, June 10). Chinese citizens

now call the verified *weibo* users the "big Vs," (大 V), which, in a straightforward way,

indicates the power the verified users have to access and disseminate information, to tell

and retell stories, and to participate in and lead public discussions. As one of the most

influential "big Vs", Jianrong Yu has gained enormous trust from his followers, which in

turn brings him more network resources to implement. More importantly, the tiny orange

label by his profile picture is a symbolic title, which is essential for someone to become

an elite in Bourdieu's sense. Being verified by *weibo* is being institutionalized as elite

within this special network. If we read through Yu's *weibo* posts, and the way he

articulates himself, we will get a better idea of how Yu constructs his elite identity online.

On the official *weibo* account of "raise your hand, rescue a child," Yu doesn't

really publish anything with his own name. Though the campaign was initiated by Yu,

the account is managed by a group of people working with him; therefore, we don't see

many personal emotions being clearly conveyed in the posts. What we see on this *weibo*

page is a continuous effort to discover and repost others' information on missing children

and child beggars, sometimes responding to desperate parents' requests to post their

missing children's pictures in order for more people to be involved. Apparently, this

account is more like a public account that shares information among people in the hope

that more abducted children can reunite with their parents. In contrast, Yu's personal

weibo is full of his own observations on society. By talking about the various people and

stories he gets involved with, he clearly and bravely shows his happiness and anger, his

hope and expectation. When I try to click on the tab "Yu's first *weibo*" in his timeline, a

message is shown saying that the post is deleted. It was very likely deleted by the Internet

administrators; as we can see from Yu's remaining posts from around that time, he was

very much interested in revealing the dark side of China's petition system. His very first

post perhaps talked about some sensitive political incident, therefore was made invisible.

Going forward a little bit, the first post that is still available on Yu's page writes:

> I ask the secretary of Yibin Municipal Party Committee to please study the
> *Constitution of People's Republic China*, and remember the 41st article: citizens
> of People's Republic China have rights to criticize and advise on anyone working
> for the governments, and rights to complain and report on any transgression of the
> law and neglect of the duty by anyone working for the governments, while any
> false charge based on fabrication or distortion of fact is prohibited. (Yu, 2010,
> October 24)

This is only one of Yu's angry yet measured posts regarding a social incident in which

government officials of the city of Yibin ill-treated petition letters and visits from rural

citizens. While this post remains available to read, and shows that it has received 178

comments, all of the comments on it have been deleted. It's not hard to imagine what

angry and excited netizens had to say about this issue. Yu is clever in talking about

political affairs like this, and he has found a way to bring them up without going near the

government's bottom line. But any effective public discussion around Yu's speech is

strictly censored. Yet Yu doesn't give up. Following this post, Yu shows a deep interest

in interviewing people who petition higher governments, and researching China's justice

and political system of letters and visits. In the following couple of months, he

continuously published posts about stories of people who got unfairly treated by government officials. And every post starts with the line: "a story about my brothers and sisters." Here is an example of one of his posts:

> A story about my brothers and sisters: Qingzhen Liu, Han ethnicity, born in 1953, resident in Dengzhou, Henan province. Due to unfair sentence on her husband, Liu went for petition visits in 1999, and was taken into custody twice after that. In 2003, Liu was taken into reeducation through labor for a year. (Yu, 2010, October 26)

This is a typical example of Yu's *weibo* posts, brief yet powerful. Even when he tells a joke about a neighbor's child, his way of telling it makes his readers think, think about what is behind the story. Very rarely does Yu use any strong words to express his disappointment, anger, or hope and excitement. He always uses plain words, sometimes even with a few words or grammar structure of ancient Chinese. The plain narration indicates that he is a scholar interested in the living situation of underprivileged Chinese and that he has been actively yet peacefully fighting for a resolution to the unfair social justice system. The ancient writing style implicates his high level of education, as not every Chinese understands, let alone can write in ancient Chinese. These characteristics of Yu's *weibo* again enhance his position in the social network, hence his ability to access more network resources and accumulate digital capital. More importantly, by calling those ordinary men and women brothers and sisters, Yu does not position himself above underprivileged Chinese people. Rather, Yu lives among them, feels what they feel, and tries to bring more and more people into their network. On January 25, 2010, after his first *weibo* on the official account of "raise your hand, rescue a child," Yu reposted that message on his personal *weibo* page, along with a brief introduction of what was taking place and what he expected to achieve in this online campaign. In the following days, he

continued to report what the online campaign had done, for instance, how many pictures

they had received, and how many parents had contacted them for various reasons. Yu

also reposted on his personal account the most appealing pictures of child beggars on

streets, who apparently were being monitored by one or two suspicious adults nearby,

and would hand in every penny they received to the adults. Yu called on people,

including celebrities, by @ing, or mentioning, their accounts in his posts, to follow the

official account of the online campaign, so that more people would be aware of it and

possibly contribute to this movement by simply taking out their phones to take pictures

and post them online. Seeing the followers growing from zero to a few thousand in a

couple of days, not only did Yu felt rewarded and confident, but every ordinary Chinese

got excited about it. It was, for many of them, the first time that they could really raise

their hands and do something in a collective effort to change others' lives and their

society. Many comments on Yu's posts regarding the campaign say that *weiguan* is

power. The simple act of collectively surrounding and looking at how the story develops

adds more possibility for the story to be exposed to a wider audience, and works with

each of the members of the network towards possible changes. This process mobilizes

everyone into the social network and enhances their ability to create and accumulate

digital capital. For Yu, by constantly reinforcing his image of a scholar and public

intellectual who cares about and feels for ordinary people through his *weibo* posts, and

connecting his name with multiple social groups and activities, he successfully

establishes powerful extensity of ties in the social network of *weibo*, which in turn

increases his ability to attain elite status both online and offline.

Another "big V" that has played a great role in this online campaign is Shiqu

Chen, the director of Office against Abduction of China's Ministry of Public Security.

Chen created his *weibo* account on December 12, 2010. It is pretty clear that he uses

weibo as a platform to publicize his daily work as a police officer focusing on preventing

human trafficking, especially abduction of children and women. His posts talk about

newly released policies and laws, stories of people and families who suffered abduction,

and successful cases where police officers rescued the kidnapped and sent them back to

their families. All his *weibo* posts are brief like Yu's, but in a very different style. If

reading Yu's *weibo* feels like reading novels, reading Chen's *weibo* is more like reading

government documents. His posts are rigid, or even dull to read through, but it goes along

well with his title, a lead police officer. This sets Chen's initial position on *weibo* as

someone high up in the political system, which gives him more social resources to take

advantage of towards the achievement of elite status. Chen also continuously reinforces

his elite identity through various approaches. Chen states very clearly in his profile page

(see Image 12) that he is a police officer working to prevent abduction of children and

women, and he has a Ph.D. in law from one of the best law schools in China. There is

also a long list of his titles and awards in the political system, indicating his contributions

and potential in this specific field. As a result, his followers will look at him as someone

with rich knowledge from higher education, and a great capability to work for people.

Unlike most other government officials on *weibo*, who also graduated from top

universities and have done amazing jobs in their own fields, Chen is one of a few that are

really welcomed and supported by ordinary Chinese citizens, rather than being criticized

for ignoring critical social problems. As a person who works in the rigid political system,

Chen has successfully shaped a warm and helpful image on *weibo*. His profile picture

(Image 13) on *weibo* is a color pencil drawing of him holding a baby in his arms.

Image 12 Chen's *weibo* page with profile information and a typical post
(Retrieved from http://weibo.com/u/1890443153?topnav=1&wvr=6&topsug=1, August
22, 2016)

Wearing a police uniform and a pair of glasses, Chen looks down at the swaddled baby

with a big smile on his face. The background of his *weibo* page features a castle on an

island, surrounded by endless blue ocean and mountains as far as the eye can see. These

images together make one immediately picture a sweet scene in which an abducted baby

is rescued by police and brought back to his/her biological parents. Additionally, Chen

adds the song of a parent whose child is missing as the background music of his *weibo*

page, which again shows his deep sympathy for the people who suffer most in Chinese

society. While ordinary people usually expect police officers to be serious or even

intimidating, Chen builds up for the public a different image of police officers—sweet

smiles, strong arms, and a beautiful mind that cares about people. Chen's *weibo* posts

Image 13 Chen's weibo page with profile picture (Retrieved from
http://weibo.com/u/1890443153?topnav=1&wvr=6&topsug=1, August 22, 2016)

also repeatedly enhance this warm image by talking about how his team has performed a

difficult task to rescue a child, or what they are hoping to see in the forthcoming new

regulation on abductions. On January 28, 2011, 3 days after Jianrong Yu created the

online campaign to rescue abducted children, Chen's attention was brought to it when he

read and reposted one of his friends' *weibo* posts. Chen immediately joined the group,

and advocated that whenever one sees a suspicious child on the street, they should call

110 (the number to call the police in China) first, and then take pictures. To protect

children's privacy, and more importantly, to prevent abducted children from being further

harmed by adults who control them, Chen asks that people get the police involved to

verify whether the suspicious adult and child are biologically related before releasing

their pictures online. This marks an important moment in the online campaign, when

Chinese citizens started to think about this whole issue as more of a critical social

problem, rather than simply feeling excited at being able to participate in something big

and meaningful. This also inspired Yu to redesign his advocacy. With the help of Chen

and his team, Yu was able to build up a special database for all the information provided

by enthusiastic citizens to match with reports of missing persons and the police system's

DNA pool. We gradually stopped seeing hundreds of pictures being posted online with

no clue as to who was in the pictures. Instead, more critical thinking and debate started to

emerge. Chen, as the only police officer who actively participated using his real name in

this public discussion at that time, soon became a bridge between ordinary people and the

government. He updated the people with information regarding new laws and regulations

related to human trafficking in China. He released information about recent criminal acts

to remind people to be cautious of anyone suspicious. He told stories of missing children

or women being rescued by local police and criminals being sentenced to jail. On

December 31, 2011, while publishing New Year greetings, Chen proudly reported that in

the past year, the Ministry of Public Security had successfully rescued almost 20,000

abducted women and children (Chen, 2011, December 31, weibo #5). In a different post

on the same day, Chen requested that people not give money to child beggars on streets,

as this would only encourage criminals to keep abducting children to make money (Chen,

2011, December 31, weibo #3). He also specifically posted a message asking young

females to be cautious of newly emerged *weibo* criminals, along with information of

recent criminal acts targeting female *weibo* users (Chen, 2011, December 31, weibo #7).

Clearly, Chen regards *weibo* as a place to extend his physical working space to the virtual

network, where more people can get involved, and more resources can be accessed and

generated. In the following years, Chen has been actively promoting the idea of "anti-

abduction by *weibo*," and has created a *weibo* group called "Baby, go home." Most of the

members in this group are parents whose children are missing, and volunteers who help

edit and discover useful information to find a match. Chen has also initiated the most

famous *wei charity* program, the Free Lunch Plan, which asks people to donate 5 RMB

for a kid from a rural area in China to be able to have a nice lunch. All these charity

activities help construct and promote Chen's caring image, which in turn gains Chen

more and more trust from ordinary *weibo* users. With his name frequently being

mentioned and brought up online, Chen soon became so well-known in this social

network that he accumulated a high level of extensity of social ties, which will take him

further in achieving and maintaining his elite status.

Another social group that has also played an important role in this online

campaign is celebrity. As stated before, when *weibo* first started, its team tried its best to

recruit as many celebrities as possible, since enrolling one celebrity almost guarantees the

enrollment of all his/her fans. Celebrities enter this online network with already-

privileged initial statuses. With proper management of their personal accounts, it's much

easier for celebrities to gain access to a huge amount of social resources, and thus even

higher elite statuses. Abovementioned female singer Hong Han is one of the few

celebrities who have given constant attention to the online campaign for abducted

children. More importantly, she has made a great effort to speak up for ordinary people,

asking for updated regulations and laws to resolve the social problem. Through reading

Han's profile page (Image 14), it is clear that she is determined to construct her identity

in three ways. First, she is an ethnic minority in China. She introduces herself on *weibo*

as "Hong Han from Changdu, Tibet," and her profile picture shows her wearing

traditional Tibetan clothes. Her more powerful title, a singer, is only displayed in tiny

print below the picture. Many of her *weibo* posts are random pictures taken in her

hometown, with blue sky and green grass, running horses and happy herdsmen. One of

her posts reads, "Back to Lhasa, back to Potala. This is my home, the home everyone dreams of" (Han, 2016, February 16). We can feel her deep love for the minority culture, and her enthusiasm for promoting minority culture to every Chinese, which is not commonly found in other celebrities' *weibo* posts. Second, Han is a singer. This is the social identity that brings Han the most economic, cultural, and social capital. For most ordinary Chinese, their initial impression of Han is an excellent singer with a beautiful

Image 14 Han's *weibo* page with profile picture(Retrieved from http://weibo.com/u/1922542315?profile_ftype=1&is_all=1#1471849063042, August 22, 2016)

voice. To most Chinese, Han is not pretty. Quite the opposite, she is overweight and short, and she doesn't care about putting on shiny dresses as other singers would. Yet she is one of the most respectable singers in China, partly because of the songs she writes and sings. On her *weibo*, Han spends much time promoting her new songs, posting pictures of her playing guitar, and discussing creative thoughts about the next piece of music she is working on with friends. This is to affirm her initial identity that Chinese people are most

familiar with, so that she can attract more followers to her page, thus acquiring more digital capital to use. The third identity that Han constructs on *weibo* is that of a social activist who cares most about underprivileged children in China. Before Jianrong Yu started the online campaign for abducted children, Han had already started reposting pictures of missing children and their families' messages asking for help. After Yu's online campaign went popular and caught Han's attention, she followed Yu's official account and started reposting messages from there, and asking her celebrity friends to repost as well. As one of the leading figures in *wei charity* for underprivileged children in China, Han does more than repost stories. She actively advocates for donations to the suffering families. She questions what the government could have done to prevent tragedies from happening. She proposes, as a member of the the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), to the government better plans that can really protect minors from human trafficking, sexual assault, medical mistreatment due to lack of money, and so on. Han's *weibo* speaks for people on the very

Image 15 *Weibo influence index* for Han (Retrieved from http://weibo.com/u/1922542315?profile_ftype=1&is_all=1#1471849063042, August 22, 2016)

bottom level in the social hierarchy, and speaks to every Chinese citizen that hopes for a more secure society for the younger generation. Therefore, ordinary Chinese see Han as a celebrity who bravely holds herself accountable for a better society, and continues working on providing a better living situation for the poor people who don't even know she is. As a superstar, Han doesn't gain social recognition because of a good-looking face or attractive body, but for her strong sense of social responsibility. In the left column on her *weibo* page, we see a section called "*weibo* influence index," (Image 15) which was not available on Jianrong Yu's or Shiqu Chen's *weibo*. This is because they are not "influential" enough to be listed in the top users, while Han is ranked number 448 by the index (as of August22, 2016). It also states that Han has received 1788 flowers, which boost her "value of love" to the high number of 3576. It is worth mentioning that the act of sending flowers is completed through bank account transactions. Upon clicking on the orange tab in the above image, which indicates "send her flowers immediately," a page (Image 16) pops out with a choice of the number of flowers a *weibo* user would like to send to the celebrity, and the amount he/she would accordingly have to pay with a personal bank account. This marks an interesting moment on *weibo* when economic capital converts into digital capital, which does not bring any economic benefit for the receiver, but transforms into a symbol of strong emotional attachment and trust from other members within the network. By constructing and affirming her multiple identities as ethnic minority, as singer, and as social activist, Han gradually accumulated a great amount of trust, resources, and accessed digital capital, which in the end reinforce her elite identity tremendously.

By examining 3 key figures in the online campaign of "raise your hand, rescue a child," we are able to get some basic ideas of how individuals construct their elite identities online with the help of accessed digital capital. Jianrong Yu, Shiqu Chen, and Hong Han, though working in different areas in the society, all regard *weibo* as a network to accrue more trust and social resources. The way they introduce themselves on *weibo* draws a picture of educated and cultivated individuals that others would normally admire and trust. They initially entered the platform from the upper levels of society, which started them off with more power to work with, and accordingly more trust from other

Image 16 Pop-up window to send Han flowers on *weibo* (Retrieved from http://weibo.com/u/1922542315?profile_ftype=1&is_all=1#1471849063042, August 22, 2016)

members in the network. They carefully manage their *weibo* pages and posts as people who are willing and able to lead their peers towards a better society. They not only provide entertainment and consume information, but more importantly, they process and produce information with critical thinking, and devote themselves to raising healthy public discussions around social issues. The three of them serve as great examples of how accessed digital capital plays a vital role in constructing an elite status on *weibo* for different social groups. Yet, accessed digital capital is after all only a starting point. Without taking advantage of mobilized digital capital, none of the three would have gained such high social status as elites.

Mobilized digital capital model

Lin (2001) designs the mobilized digital capital model to examine the "mobilization of social capital in the process of status attainment—the use of social contacts and the resources provided by the contact" (p. 82). As illustrated in image 1, this model puts special attention on "tie strength with contact" and "contact status." Lin marks the relationship between "network resources" and "tie strength with contact," as well as the relationship between "tie strength with contact" and "contact status" with "-," because from two research projects by other scholars respectively performed in China and Germany, Lin concludes that "strength of ties (measured by the intensity of the relationship between ego and the contact) had no effect on contact statuses or on attained occupational status and income" (p. 87). However, education and network resources all have positive effect on contact status, which in turn helps the ego attain higher status.

Manning (2015) views Lin's theories on social capital as a functionalist one, and

he points out that Lin, in one of his earlier work titled "A Theory of Social Structure and

Action" (1999), identifies two types of actions of exchange:

> First for expressive purposes; that is, actions for their own sake with actors who have similar resources: in Lin's network terminology, homophilious interactions. And second, for instrumental purposes; that is, actions with a purpose of achieving certain goals with actors with different resources: heterogeneous interactions (*ibid*., p. 58). Lin also considers that strong ties are positively associated with expressive action and weak ties with instrumental action (*ibid*., p. 76). (Manning, 2015, p. 89)

This distinction between actions with expressive purposes and instrumental purposes

serves as a good framework to measure elites' attainment of high social statuses in

relation to tie strength with contacts and contact statuses. As we understand, actions with

expressive purposes oftentimes echo with what people with similar social standings have

to say; therefore, the tie between the two is prone to be stronger. On the contrary, actions

for instrumental purposes aim to recruit people who are not within the network. Therefore,

the ties between these social actors are not very strong, but more flexible and powerful.

To some extent, Lin's distinction on two types of actions goes along with Putnam's (2000)

classification between *bridging social capital* and *bonding social capital*.

> Of all the dimensions along which forms of social capital vary, perhaps the most important is the distinction between *bridging* (or inclusive) and *bonding* (or exclusive). Some forms of social capital are, by choice or necessity, inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups… Other networks are outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages… Bonding social capital is good for undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity… Bridging networks, by contrast, are better for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion. (p. 22)

Therefore, in a social network that is rich in *bonding social capital*, we can expect to see

more actions with expressive purposes, whereas in a social network rich in *bridging*

social capital, we would expect more actions with instrumental purposes. As Putnam

argues, "bonding and bridging are not 'either-or' categories into which social networks can be neatly divided, but 'more or less' dimensions along which we can compare different forms of social capital" (p. 23).The expressive and instrumental actions also very likely coexist or even rely upon each other in constructing the actors' multiple identities. Fukuyama (2001) proposes the concept of "the radius of trust" to articulate bridging and bonding social capital in another way. He argues that, "All groups embodying social capital have a certain radius of trust, that is, the circle of people among who cooperative norms are operative" (p. 8). With a narrow radius of trust, the social network tends to produce more *thick trust* in Putnam's sense, which ensures a strong tie among members hence more actions with expressive purposes. With a wide radius of trust, the social network will very likely produce more *thin trust*, and embrace more actions with instrumental purposes among members with weak social ties. As Putnam claims, thin trust is oftentimes more useful than thick trust in terms of generating collective action towards social changes. In my study, to measure the radius of trust, or the amount of thick trust and thin trust someone generates on *weibo*, is very helpful in determining how he/she mobilizes digital capital to attain a desired social status. In this section, I will revisit the above-mentioned active figures in the online campaign to examine how bridging and bonding digital capital is generated and mobilized within the social network, and how actions with expressive and instrumental purposes are conducted to include and exclude certain social identities, in order to reinforce their own reputation and elite statuses.

The official account that Jianrong Yu created on *weibo* for the online campaign, by its nature, serves as a bridge for ordinary people to enter a wider network. A typical

post by this official account is a brief line writing "Please help disseminate this message," "Please help find this child," or "Baby, go back home soon, your parents are waiting for you," followed by a repost of an ordinary *weibo* user's message about a missing child. The original message usually contains the missing child's name and photos, date of birth, date and location he/she went missing, his/her parents' contact information, and very importantly, a list of *weibo* users mentioned at the end. The official account of "raise your hand, rescue a child" and Jianrong Yu are often found in the list, together with other similar anti-abduction accounts, and individual accounts of celebrities who have shown special attention to related social problems. By mentioning celebrities, one clearly expects to get more attention from others on *weibo*, and initiate a bigger discussion and potentially more collective actions around the missing child. While ordinary *weibo* users have only limited access to network resources, they rely on those who have more resources to share to invite them into the wider network. Therefore, to the ordinary user's end, the tie between him/her and those celebrity users is very strong. Whether the celebrity is willing to include the ordinary user into the conversation, or to what extent the celebrity would share resources and advocate for actions on the part of the ordinary user, is solely the celebrity's decision to make. As a result, the strong tie between the two impedes the ordinary user's ability to attain higher social status. On the other hand, celebrities who respond to ordinary users' calls for help complete the symbolic exchange by a simple act of *weibo* posting. This action is an invitation to ordinary users who struggle for more publicity and attention. By reposting someone's message, a celebrity chooses to include this person into his/her own network, and produce digital capital together with all members in the network for both of them to use. What is important to

note here is that celebrities don't make this choice purely out of generosity. Quite the

opposite, celebrities foresee long-term rewards by fulfilling this exchange with ordinary

users. Lin (2001) argues that "there are two ultimate (or primitive) rewards for human

beings in a social structure: economic standing and social standing," and he insists (in a

footnote) that "a third reward, political standing (or power), is also important, but

probably is not as primitive as the other two rewards" (p. 149-150). I won't deny the

critical role of economic standing, or wealth, in constructing someone's elite identity,

especially when we talk about offline cases. But in this research, what is of the most

significance is actually social standing and political standing. In the virtual network

where clicks mean almost everything, what *weibo* users are chasing after are social

recognition, good reputation, and above all strong influence on others' opinions. The

power dynamics between different social actors are nearly invisible, but exist in a subtle

yet significant way, so that one can only grasp the essence of the social network and take

real use of it by locating him/herself well in this hierarchical structure. Lin is very sharp

in pointing out that "it is the capacity of resource mobilization through social ties, or

social capital, that make social relationships a powerful motivation for individual actors

to engage in exchanges" (p. 150), and that imbalanced exchanges between different social

actors serve as powerful forces to enhance reputation and social standing for the

privileged (p. 150). If we look more closely at the exchanges between ordinary users and

the official account initiated by Yu, they are indeed imbalanced. Obviously, while all the

ordinary users that request help are also followers on Yu's personal account and his

official anti-abduction account, not very often does Yu follow back. A close look at the

list of 598 accounts that Yu's official account follows shows that most of them are local

police officers, journalists, television programs or other media platforms for social charity, celebrities, and foundations. This indicates that while families with missing children rely on Yu's account for more information and exposure, Yu doesn't grant much reciprocal confidence and trust in the families, in terms of accessing more social resources. Moreover, while we see parents of missing children constantly comment and repost Yu's messages to show gratitude to him, or to help other families who suffer deeply from human trafficking, Yu very rarely comments back in public. This doesn't mean Yu doesn't feel for the poor, however. Yu clearly understands *weibo* as a platform for effective information sharing, and he has ways to effectively mobilize social capital on it. Through an imbalanced exchange with ordinary users, what Yu has obtained is more appreciation among the public, better public reputation and respect, and higher elite status. On the other hand, by mentioning local newspapers and police departments, social activists and celebrities, Yu's official account mobilizes these individuals and groups into the making of a social network for rescuing missing children. This has constructed another layer of imbalanced exchange between Yu and other accounts owned by people with higher social statuses. The exchange provides Yu with more accessed social capital, and others with better social standings and reputation.

The same thing takes place within interactions between ordinary users and Shiqu Chen, the police officer. Many of his posts are also reposting other *weibo* users' requests for help, not only for disseminating information about a missing child or woman, but also for the police department to take steps to rescue all children in danger and modify laws and regulations accordingly so that criminals might stop being so unruly. Accordingly, Chen responds to these requests in the language of a police officer. When he reposts a

post about a missing child, he usually writes something like "please contact me with more details," or "please contact your local police department immediately and call 110." There is not much emotional expression on Chen's *weibo*. What he presents is his capacity to mobilize around government officials, police officers, journalists, and ordinary people, to actively find a missing child or rescue an abducted woman. What is generated within such a process is the bridging social capital that includes every social group into the social network; therefore, anyone would be able to take part in the making of a public discussion. But again, such an inclusion is based on imbalanced exchange. It is an exchange with instrumental purposes, and only weak ties are built within this structure. After all, when a case is successfully closed, or is unfortunately forgotten by people as time goes by, the relationship between Chen and ordinary users who ask for help becomes compromised. Though the weak tie won't necessarily bring the ordinary user long-lasting benefit, it ensures Chen, and others alike, the possibility of a wider radius of trust, which keeps reinforcing their reputation within the network and extending positive externalities.

As mentioned above, the relationship between exchanges with expressive purposes and those with instrumental purposes is not "either/or." During communication between different social groups, we can easily identify exchange in both forms, which both contribute to elites' identity construction. On Yu's and Chen's *weibo* pages, we often spot other public intellectuals' or social activists' names being mentioned, especially in the posts that are more personal in the sense that they speak for Yu or Chen as an individual, rather than a public figure. This is because when they speak for themselves, they usually speak about their major interests in life or their careers, and

speak to those who have similar interests and similar social status. For example, when Yu talks about his concerns about the petition system in China, he would mention some other scholars in the same field as him, and some social activists who have been advocating for the mistreated underprivileged. The exchanges that take place within such a dialogue are more out of expressive needs, and only bonding digital capital is generated in such exchanges. Borrowing Burt's (2005) "echo hypothesis," we can see that though one's extensity of ties is likely narrower than mobilizing bridging digital capital, bonding digital capital can also help enormously in building up a good reputation (p. 196). In Burt's reputation-generating theory, what's more important is not who is talking about what, but rather with whom one is talking. So a network is of much importance in generating reputation, as reputation is owned by "the people in whose conversations it is built, and the goal of those conversations is not accuracy so much as bonding between the speakers" (p. 196). On *weibo*, bonding digital capital emerges and multiplies when people within the same network echo each other. Each time one gets mentioned or reposted, his/her digitized self gets more exposure and recognition. If the "contact"—the person who mentions or reposts one's message—resides in a higher social platform and has a good reputation, the prestige contact status will help boost his/her ability to attain elite status. For this reason, we usually find that *weibo* users from the upper social levels tend to actively dialogue with people from the same or higher levels only. Ordinary people don't get much attention from elites, even when they name or mention the elites in their posts. This is the dark side of social capital, whose nature makes it exclusive to members within a network. Others from outside usually find it difficult to join a well-established network, especially if its members are politically and socially superior to non-

members. For example, when above mentioned singer Hong Han first started paying attention to abducted children, she usually called on her celebrity friends to join her in sharing information to the public, and therefore built up a small circle of hers within which everyone echoes each other, and everyone builds up their own publicity and reputation together. Confirming Burt's (2005) reputation generation theory, higher contact status boosts one's ability in attaining higher social status. It is normally the case in the digital world, too.

Different than social capital in the physical world though, digital capital on *weibo* can also emerge when someone gets criticized. After all, the Internet provides a space for much freer expression, and easier access to information. Therefore, unlike in a physical network, where the majority of its members are more likely to share the same belief and stick with the same norms, *weibo* offers its users more diversities and possibilities. They tend to very easily change their mind, too. Therefore, to some extent, exposure—whether positive or negative—generates positive digital capital. In February 2011, when the debate on whether posting children beggars' pictures online is morally and legally right went viral, singer Hong Han insisted on justifying the right and necessity for everyone to post pictures of suspicious children and kids, and she continued to share related information on her *weibo* page. One of the messages she posted upon request was about a child beggar in Sanya city, and the story was titled "Girl crawling and begging on streets of Sanya, with her bottom severely wounded by human traffickers." Such a shocking story, with a picture of a pretty but disabled girl crawling on the street, holding a can asking for money and smiling at people, soon raised huge public attention. That girl's smiling face suddenly became available everywhere on the Internet. However, after local

police department took the girl to conduct an investigation, it turned out that the girl

wasn't abducted or being tortured at all. Many started to blame Han for spreading rumors

irresponsibly and wasting people's time and tears. More criticized Han and others for

their irresponsible actions of posting innocent children's pictures online without first

verifying who they really are. Usually, when a crisis like this happened, the celebrity and

his/her agency would immediately delete everything related to this issue online to prevent

any further negative publicity. Though Han also deleted the post with the girl's picture in

it, Han did it to protect the girl's privacy, not to protect herself from being searched and

criticized by people. Then, Han decided to bravely apologize for this independent

incident, and fight back for what she thought was right to do: to keep posting information

online with hope that maybe one kid would get back to his/her parents with the help of

weibo.

> "My sincere apology: Earlier I reposted a story of 'Girl crawling and begging on
> streets of Sanya, with her bottom severely wounded by human traffickers.' If the
> information is not true, I sincerely apologize! Please forgive me! It's hard to tell
> false from true. But I don't feel guilty for what I have been doing. Hong Han
> thanks all of you kind people!" (Han, 2011, February 18, weibo #8)

In another post earlier that day, Han expressed her anger towards those people who

simply accused her for not being accountable to the public. She wrote that, "I don't care!

Even if in 100 posts, only 1 is real, and this one kid can find his parents, I will continue

posting them!" (Han, 2011, February 18, weibo #7) Surprisingly, despite the fact that

Han became over-emotional on a public platform, and even used inappropriate words that

a celebrity would normally avoid using in public, most of the comments Han received

under these two posts were to support her, and even appreciate her for being brave

enough to apologize and continue with what she thought was best to do. Many ordinary

users decided to follow Han and become one of her fans simply because of her frankness and the courage to take responsibility for her actions. As a result, a great amount of bridging digital capital was generated out of a criticism that Han received, and her brave way to face it. The ties between Han and those who commented under her posts were weak, or even random; Han surprisingly obtained a much wider radius of trust within the public, which greatly helped her in attaining and maintaining her elite status.

By analyzing how Jianrong Yu, Shiqu Chen, and Hong Han communicate online with people from different levels of society, we have gotten a basic idea of how they take advantage of different types of symbolic exchange to generate both bonding and bridging digital capital to acquire and maintain their elite status. By mobilizing among different social groups, these public figures keep widening their radius of trust by echoing with people who have more power in the social hierarchy, and responding to those who are from below with conservative exchanges. The wider radius of trust, together with the initial elite status of many of their contacts, helps them establish and maintain their elite status in the virtual network of *weibo*.

Conclusion

There are many other important figures who actively take part in the online campaign of "raise your hand, rescue a child." Some of them enter this platform as elites elsewhere in the society, some successfully attain their elite status while participating, and many more, whose names also become well-known, fail to become social elites in a more critical sense. Take Gaofeng Peng, a father who successfully found his missing son with help of Yu's online campaign, for instance. After his son was abducted in 2009, Peng began a bitter journey of looking for him. In 2012, with a picture taken by an

ordinary person sent to him, and a series of collective efforts by Peng, his friends, and police departments, Peng finally got his son back. The whole story is so touching that in 2014, one of the most famous Chinese directors, Kexin Chen, together with the best actor and actress, Bo Huang, and Wei Zhao, produced a film "Dearest" based on Peng's experience. The film immediately went popular in China, and Peng's name got famous among ordinary Chinese families. As of March 2016, he has acquired more than 277,000 followers on *weibo*, and is verified by *sina* as a VIP user. Among his followers, there are celebrities, journalists, parents who lost their children, and more ordinary people who are simply touched by Peng's experience. However, these don't guarantee Peng an elite status. If we examine Peng's identity with both *accessed social capital model* and *mobilized social capital model*, we can see that the resources Peng can reach and utilize are rather limited. First of all, Peng didn't receive a high level of education, and his initial status when entering the public discussion was a migrant worker who lost his child. His *weibo* posts did not show him as a person with good literary skills, or critical thinking. Besides his special identity, he doesn't have more resources to share with others; therefore, he can only gain access to those people who really feel for him and care about the social problem of human trafficking. His extensity of ties is so limited that it is still difficult for him to attain higher status in the society. Secondly, though Peng has gained a great number of followers, and these social contacts can possibly share resources with him, he only has a very limited ability to mobilize around these people and resources. This is because what he has formed with his contacts is merely *thick trust*, instead of *thin trust*, which is more flexible to utilize. The *radius of trust* that Peng possesses is pretty narrow, because only a few of his followers are still having effective dialogues with him,

and very rarely can he provide useful resources for ordinary people. I admit that Peng has gained good reputation within the network, but this reputation isn't powerful enough to make him a public figure in initiating critical thinking and public discussions. Therefore, a big number of followers, or an orange "V" beside one's account name, doesn't guarantee elite status. Only if one has access to a good amount of digital capital and the ability to mobilize that digital capital among different social groups within the social structure, can he/she really construct an elite identity in the digital network. The next chapter will continue with this idea and look into specifically how the transformation between lower and higher statuses takes place in the virtual network on *weibo*, and what such transformations have brought to the social structure, both socially and politically.

CHAPTER 5

TRANSFORMATION AND MOBILIZATION OF ELITES' IDENTITIES

With the help of the disseminating power of the Internet, especially social networking sites like *weibo*, countless people like Gaofei Peng became known to the public overnight within the past decade. Quite a few lucky ones have successfully crossed the boundary between ordinary people and elites, while many more of them still find it difficult to attain or maintain elite statuses. To some extent, it is the moment of crossing the boundary that excites ordinary people to actively participate into public issues. They don't have to permanently cross the boundary and become elites to enjoy the excitement. A short visit into the elite circle, or even just an opportunity to get close to the circle, makes their daily life quite different. These moments present great value in researching the relationship between elites and other social groups. The potential of transformation and the power of mobilization between multiple social identities make the elite identity harder to define, yet more attractive and meaningful to work with. In this chapter, I will introduce several popular cases that have evidenced different levels of transformation and mobilization of elites' identities in order to get a more comprehensive understanding of how this social group constructs itself and interplays with others in contemporary society.

While Lin's (2001) social capital model of status attainment (illustrated in Chapter 5) still serves as a good reference to investigate how different social groups obtain and maintain their social statuses, this chapter will also be framed around Patulny's (2009) statement about three aspects of social capital. The key aspects that Patulny emphasizes are *norms*, *networks*, and *practices* (Patulny, 2009, p. 405). Ramos-Pinto (2007) regards *norms* as "ruling those relationships prescribe how individuals

should relate to other group members in varying degrees of strength, and prescribing different roles in social exchange" (p. 69). Patulny considers *trust* to be the most crucial norm in accruing social capital (p. 405), as many scholars have stated the importance of trustworthiness (and oftentimes together with reciprocity) for social capital (Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 2000). As another key aspect of social capital, *networks* "connect individuals within and across power and identity structures" (Ramos-Pinto, p. 68-69). Patulny is referring to the bonding, bridging, and linking social capital network types that have been illustrated in literature, especially by Putnam and Szreter (2002) (p. 405). As Putnam explains, bonding social capital is "by choice or necessity, inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups" (p. 22), whereas bridging social capital is "outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages" (p. 22). This classification is very useful in terms of thinking about how multiple identities are engaged together in the same network, and what kinds of activities are expected to grow out of this network. The third type, linking social capital, is not as often mentioned in literature, and "is said to capture the ties between citizens and government, and was captured in the introduction with the example of the USA" (Patulny, p. 407). As Patulny also questions whether this third type really stands on its own, I won't focus on linking social capital for this discussion, either. It doesn't serve the main purpose of this topic, and oftentimes it overlaps with the other two types of networks. For *practices*, Patulny actually refers to activities that are generated within social networks (p. 405-406). Practices, or activities, are important to examine the mobilization of social identities around public issues. Therefore, this chapter will focus on norms and networks to analyze the transformation of elite identities online, and then examine further the individual and

collective activities that help with the mobilization of elite and other identities. As identity transformation and mobilization is a flexible process where each case might present its own characteristics and possibilities, this chapter picks out two influential online legends for a comparative discussion. One is *Brother Sharp*, which tells a story of a homeless man who accidentally became known to every Chinese overnight. The other features previously mentioned Xuriyanggang, a band of two migrant workers who successfully promoted themselves online and have become well-known singers. Hopefully, by comparing the two stories, we can paint a more comprehensive picture of how different social groups construct and transform their identities in one network.

The legend: *Brother Sharp*

Web celebrity, in Chinese 网红, is a name given to ordinary people who get very popular on the Internet, either unexpectedly or planned and promoted by a web hyper. They usually stand out during a social incident that attracts plenty of online attention. Or some of their characteristics perfectly cater to people's interests or excitement, and they get rapidly exposed and promoted to the public. For example, the two most popular web celebrities of 2015 in China were *Papi Jiang*, who makes funny satire videos on critical social issues to post on *weibo*, and *Huiyi Zhuanyong Xiaomajia*, who advocates for animal protection online and has gradually built up a platform for all Chinese to discuss issues of pets and animals.

Among all the web celebrities, Brother Sharp caused the highest level of astonishment among Chinese citizens. The story began with a series of casual pictures taken by someone testing his new camera in Ningbo, China, in 2010. He first uploaded

the pictures (see image 17) to *fengniao*[5] to start a professional discussion on the technical

issues of his pictures and the new camera. But unexpectedly, all of a sudden, the pictures

appeared on *weibo* and *Tianya*, both of the most popular and active online forums for

Chinese netizens at that time, and gained huge public attention. As reported, from

February 23, 2010, Brother Sharp's first appearance on *Tianya*, to March 7, 2010, the day

Brother Sharp went home and reunited with his family, the news reports and posts online

Image 17 Picture of Brother Sharp (Online image retrieved from *Local government reaching out to Brother Sharp*, 2010, March 3)

had reached the number of 6,640 (Zhu, 2010, p. 35). Even now, six years later, Brother

Sharp is still often referred to when talking about relevant social issues, or even during

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[5]www.fengniao.com, founded in 2000, merged with web media CNET, then became a member of CBSi in 2008. Now, *fengniao* has become one of the most frequently visited video media sites in China. Its users are mainly photography experts, professionals, or fans.

someone's personal expression. What's the magic of these photos? *The Independent*

describes them as follows:

> The photograph shows a starkly handsome Chinese man walking with a model's measured gait, and wearing a rag-tag but well co-ordinated overcoat on top of a leather jacket. His eyes peer into the middle distance, in what one fan described as "a deep and penetrating way", and he strides confidently forward.
>   But this is no catwalk model. This is a homeless man in the city of Ningbo. And now a band of web followers are calling him the coolest man in China.(Coonan, 2010, paragraph 1, 2)

"The coolest man in China" was also referred to as "Beggar Prince" or "Handsome

Vagabond," but the most accepted name is "Brother Sharp." It is hard to say where

indeed the name "Brother Sharp" comes from. It could be from his "taste" of dressing.

It's filthy but so fashionable that many were comparing his style of dress to Western

models and stars. The name could have originated from his eyes, which always seem so

deep and blue that people find his gaze irresistibly touching yet hard to understand. "The

coolest man" appeared to be comparable to European and Japanese models. Some put

Brother Sharp's picture next to that of a European runway model to prove how

fashionable his style is (see Image 18). A well-known host of a TV entertainment

program in Taiwan even dressed like Brother Sharp in his show. In a couple of days,

Brother Sharp went from an ignored street hobo to a web celebrity, in the sense that

nearly every Chinese, both online and offline, had heard the name and his story, and

many showed great sympathy and interest in helping him out.

He could have been "ignored" as merely an entertainment figure that people

would automatically consume and quickly forget about. However, this case was so

Image 18 Picture of Brother Sharp and a runway model (Online image retrieved from *How is Brother Sharp doing?* 2014, November 26)

special that curious Chinese citizens were eager to find out who this Brother Sharp really

was. Actually, the first post on *Tianya* about Brother Sharp was to call upon people's

collective effort to *human flesh search*[6] this homeless guy. It immediately ignited

collective excitement among Chinese citizens to consume this nobody with a common

belief that together they could make a change for Brother Sharp. Soon enough, Brother

Sharp was identified as the father of two teenage boys. 11 years ago, he came from his

hometown in Jiangxi province to Ningbo in order to make some money for his family.

Unfortunately, three years later, his family lost contact with him. He was also described

as mentally disturbed, as people who encountered him on streets found it impossible to

talk with him. After that, the public started to look at Brother Sharp as a victim of society,

rather than someone to entertain or be humiliated for fun. Some social workers and

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[6]*Human flesh search*, in Chinese 人肉搜索, is a Chinese cultural phenomenon indicating a method of searching for and identifying a person with the help of online forums and blogs and other media. This cultural concept usually embodies public humiliation for the object being sought. Fengjie's real identity was exposed after a massive human flesh search. So was Brother Sharp's.

volunteers also jumped online and on other media to talk about their personal encounters with Brother Sharp. One of them said, "Homeless people are vulnerable. It is incorrect to use them for entertainment purposes" (Coonan, 2010, paragraph 8). For better or worse, a pure entertainment online incident raised a collective political concern. People in and around Ningbo city tried to reach out to Brother Sharp on the street, just to buy him food and communicate with him, and social workers did get him to social aid stations for both mental and physical help. Both local and central governments declared their determination to help Brother Sharp out. His story was even mentioned in NPC and CPPCC, which were being held around that time. Brother Sharp inspired the deeply rooted spirit of collectivism in traditional Chinese culture, hence we saw so many individuals participating in this legendary action in the hopes of fulfilling their own social responsibilities: to help each other and make a better society. Enormous effort was required to work things out with Brother Sharp, and amazingly, 12 days after his debut online, he went back home to his mother, brother, and children.

This return home did not indicate the end of the story. Chinese citizens had been enthusiastically discussing the question of whether or not "we" had done a good thing for Brother Sharp. They also questioned whether it symbolized a success for citizens to gain social and discursive power in mash-up culture, and to dialogue with mainstream media and ideology. It is always hard to measure success, but what is undoubtedly true is that a collective consciousness among Chinese (and even global) netizens has been rising through the collective narration and interpretation of Brother Sharp. Many social groups take part in this process of transforming random activities to collective actions, within which different social identities have been constructed and mobilized. Brother Sharp, as a

representative of homeless people and web celebrities, was so hot in the following couple

of years that many came to him and his family for commercial interests. But his mental

illness prevented him from communicating with people accordingly for a long time. Even

worse, he wasn't able to engage in normal life with his family. It is reported that, in 2014,

Brother Sharp was admitted by a local mental institution. But after being discharged from

the institution a year later, in 2015, Brother Sharp was missing again (Brother Sharp has

been missing for a year: Being a web celebrity doesn't change his life after all, February

24, 2016). Though Brother Sharp himself is no longer a hot topic within the public, and

there has never been any online account for him on *weibo* and other sites, the phrase

"brother sharp" is still often mentioned online. Sometimes people use it to refer to people

like Brother Sharp. Sometimes it is just used to represent a free-living status or life style.

Brother Sharp has become a symbol for groups of people that are poor, underprivileged,

or just those who are too cool to comply with society. The social problems and cultures

Brother Sharp presents for us are oftentimes overlooked, yet profound and shocking for

every Chinese.

As discussed in opening chapters, elite identity, together with the identities of

other social groups, is a fluid continuum. *Weibo*, as a web genre that encourages more

inclusion and flexibility within the public, has greatly increased the fluidity of various

subject positions. Different from other legends like *Fengjie*7, the collective attention on

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[7]Fengjie, also known as "Sister Feng," has become one of the most popular online celebrities since late 2009. Her first move to intentionally grab public attention was to post fliers on streets in search of a boyfriend, who had to meet excessive requirements, including high education and income. However, Fengjie was a female with low height, low income, and low education. People started to make fun of Fengjie online by collecting her typically ridiculous quotes, and Photoshopping her images. She later claimed that she was the smartest person in the past 300 years, and no one would compare with her in the future 300 years, and she wanted to eventually

Brother Sharp is not just to make fun of an incident or to catch up with popular culture; rather, the story of Brother Sharp indicates that, in China, the Internet has opened up a way for the public to construct collective consciousness through mashing up different techniques, and mashing up various subject positions both online and offline. The concept of mash-up not only precisely pinpoints the fact that *weibo* is a place for people to create and recreate texts, but more importantly, that it is a place to bring different cultures, thoughts, and identities to converge. Mash-up, originally a name for music, film, and other creative art making, is a way to create new texts by blending, sampling, collage, and other techniques of remixing preexisting texts. A mash-up culture is a culture constructed by a greater number of participants, by means of discovering existing cultural elements, sharing them, and remixing them to produce various social meanings. According to Barthes (1979), this is a way to generate *intertextuality*. Different from "work," which emphasizes the physical occupation of fixed materiality, "text" is a demonstrated methodological concept that denies authority and embraces multiple layers of meanings. The text is always a series of interweaving signifiers to which anyone could add his or her own interpretation. To me, each single text is the fundamental methodological pursuit of the construction of meanings of mash-up culture. Moreover, each subject is an active consumer or producer, or both at the same time, of this mash-up cultural incident. And this is the key to create moments for people to cross the boundary between ordinary people and elites, and to make the transformation between different social identities possible. If we look closely at how each individual and social group accumulates digital capital around their subject positions while the stories unfold, we will

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become President Obama's mistress. Fengjie now lives in New York City holding a green card, and she still maintains a great amount of public attention.

capture the moments when boundary crossings take place, and possible collective actions emerge. By comparing the two cases, we hope to see what helps someone attain higher status, and more importantly, what is required to maintain such status. We will also be able to see what kind of influence these online legends and web celebrities have on our society.

Brother Sharp's fame first began from his unique dressing style. It seemed like he just put on whatever was at hand, and it became a presentation of fashion. Being homeless for 11 years, Brother Sharp had found his own way to find clothes from garbage cans and mash up his own texts on his body. "Mash-up" was actually a word frequently used to describe Brother Sharp's dressing style. The very first post on *weibo* about Brother Sharp reads:

> The man I admire, Brother Sharp in legend! Here is what people are saying: we can find Japanese fashion ideas in his Western mash-up dressing style. His design is no worse than the top fashion experts. The most desired Japanese hair style. He wears a second hand coat from some vintage store, which goes well with his *Louis Vuitton* paper made handbag. The most important element in his dressing is the red rope around his waist. This is not a regular belt that everybody could afford. It is a limited edition belt of *Gucci* xclot color block belt. Only those who are willing to sacrifice for fashion deserve it… (Me in mirror, 2010, February 22, weibo #1)

This was a repost of someone's description of Brother Sharp's first picture on *fengniao*, which got so popular that many people were reposting it, and Brother Sharp soon became a fashion icon, who appeared to really know well how to keep up with the trends. Among the first group of posts on *weibo* about Brother Sharp, you would expect most people to be expressing sympathy for this poor man, or to talk about helping him get back to normal life. But surprisingly, a greater number of the posts contain various words that mean "admire." Very soon did we start to see ordinary people posting pictures of

themselves dressing like Brother Sharp. And many people in Ningbo city started to go find Brother Sharp and take pictures with him. The Brother Sharp style became popular not only because people were enthusiastic about working together to help this poor man, so that plenty of attention was given to him, but also due to the fact that Brother Sharp dressed in a way that read as "fashionable." It was not the first time that homeless men inspired people's fashion, however. It was reported that "Two years ago the supermodel Erin Wasson revealed the homeless were her fashion inspiration, saying: 'When I... see the homeless, like, I'm like, 'Oh my God, they're pulling out, like, crazy looks and they, like, pull shit out of like garbage cans'" (Coonan, paragraph 7). Of course these homeless people are not trying to present any art; their only desire is physical and material: to protect themselves from cold and humiliation. However, they coincidentally create a symbol of mash-up culture. Only Brother Sharp's debut on the Internet made this symbol available to be consumed by the public.

And the public does everything they can to consume this cultural symbol of fashion, blended with their own interpretation and desire. Above Image 2 is a juxtaposition of Brother Sharp's picture and a picture of a model showing the latest *Dolce & Gabbana* collection. It's strange in the sense that the two of them standing together doesn't make the whole picture look strange at all. Though coming from clearly different fields and class, Brother Sharp and the model share a similar dressing style. The first person who posted Image 2 on *weibo* narrated it this way, "Brother Sharp on the left. Model in new released *D&G* winter style on the right. I am not saying anything. Just take a look yourself" (Lee Peng, 2010, February 25). As an ordinary *weibo* user whose posts usually only got a couple of comments and reposts, Lee Peng got 436 comments under

this post, which was reposted 1028 times. Most of the comments were again conveying their admiration of Brother Sharp, and asserting that Brother Sharp is more handsome and sexier than the model on the right. The pictures of Brother Sharp soon spread over to everyone's *weibo* page, and "Brother Sharp" was in *weibo*'s top topic list for nearly a week. More interestingly, people started using *Photoshop* and other software to mash up images of Brother Sharp with classic cultural texts, like movies, paintings, and songs. So we had pictures featuring Brother Sharp with Rose on Titanic, Brother Sharp's face on Mona Lisa's body, and most prominently, a song made by ordinary netizens based on an old classic song about a smart homeless Buddhist monk who always helped the poor over the rich. These mash-up images and songs were posted and reposted all over *weibo*. Brother Sharp, as a symbol of mash-up culture, is also remixed with popular culture in a global sense. Japanese news soon picked up this Chinese online legend in their top journals and *Yahoo! Japan*, which marked the moment when Brother Sharp turned into someone widely accepted internationally. One *weibo* user said on February 28, nearly a week after Brother Sharp's picture was out, that "Brother Sharp, why are you so popular? I feel embarrassed for not mentioning you on my *weibo*" (Zhu shui tang gou xiong, 2010, February 28). With more and more people consuming and reproducing this story, Brother Sharp gradually accumulated a great amount of digital capital that homeless people don't usually have access to. Brother Sharp went from a random homeless person on the street with a mental disorder to a "famous" homeless person who gained access to public attention, thus getting more money from strangers for food, more people and news media taking pictures and publishing articles for him, and more hope for him to receive social and medical aid from the government and society. Brother Sharp might not necessarily

understand the whole thing, but he was able to suddenly harvest more resources to (passively or actively) take advantage of. Many ordinary people regarded Brother Sharp as a celebrity, in the sense that he is good-looking, well-known in public, and he presents great commercial potential. One post says it this way, with which many people would agree: "Brother Sharp now can be called a celebrity. However, the way he got famous was full of struggles and frustrations. I feel jealous, yet so sorry for this man" (XiaochanLUCI, 2010, February 26).

Brother Sharp was undoubtedly one of the most famous web celebrities in 2010, or even in the Internet history of China. But does this mean that Brother Sharp has successfully crossed the boundary and become an elite? 5 minutes after the abovementioned post, the *weibo* user XiaochanLUCI posted something else on Brother Sharp. It was commenting on another famous post: "The famous Ningbo local philanthropist Old Hungry Cat has claimed that he had some contact with Brother Sharp. According to him, Brother Sharp is mentally disordered. He loves wearing women's clothes that he found in trash. He never begs for money. He lives on foods from garbage cans and money people willingly give to him. He is abandoned by the society. If we help him a little bit, he can become a human being. If we neglect or despise him, he is no different with an animal." And XiaochanLUCI commented, "I think he is no longer merely an animal. He has evolved into a human being" (XiaochanLUCI, 2010, February 26). This comment was important, as it recognized what the online exposure had really brought to Brother Sharp. With everyone excitedly talking about him, Brother Sharp was promoted to a very high level in the social hierarchy that he had crossed the boundary between his old identity and the new one. He not only represents himself, but also

becomes a representative for many people like him, who need more attention and help from the government and public.

But I won't call Brother Sharp elite. According to Lin's (2001) model, Brother Sharp's education level and initial status are too low; that and the fact that he cannot even communicate with others make it nearly impossible for him to enter the elite circle. As after all, being an elite requires one to take on a leading role within the network, to initiate more engaged public discussions, and to mobilize for more collective consciousness and actions. But Brother Sharp can hardly even speak for himself, let alone speak for others in the society. However, we have to admit that Brother Sharp gets included in a higher social circle due to his increased access to network resources and lower tie strength with contacts. If we evaluate Brother Sharp's identity with Patulny's (2009) three aspects of social capital, we will understand why Brother Sharp, as a web celebrity, couldn't really become social elite. In the three aspects, norm, networks, and practice, Brother Sharp only obtained a good network that he could have virtually taken a leading role in and made use of. But later on, we could gradually see that Brother Sharp didn't have the ability to mobilize within this network among other social groups; therefore, not much social capital was generated for him. Moreover, what he failed to generate is collective trust and practices from the public. As a man who is mentally disabled and has been wandering the streets for more than 10 years, Brother Sharp lost the ability and desire to engage with others. On March 1, 2010, a video of Brother Sharp collapsing in front of officials of the local social aid station was released online, which made Chinese start to think about the whole story in a different way. In this video, the officials clearly had invited journalists to come report that the local government was

taking actions to help Brother Sharp, but Brother Sharp got nervous in front of the crowd of people and many video cameras. Abovementioned "Old Hungry Cat," a middle age man wearing a baseball cap, was also on the scene. He claimed in the video that he had known Brother Sharp for years and even lived with him for a while years ago. He tried to talk with Brother Sharp and negotiate between him and the local officials. Old Hungry Cat was asking Brother Sharp basic questions, such as his name and home address, but Brother Sharp could only murmur and whimper so that no one could really understand his words. When the officials asked Brother Sharp to come with them to the social aid station, Brother Sharp immediately refused to go. With more people gathering around and trying to persuade him to go with officials, Brother Sharp finally couldn't help but cry and scream into the air. This was beyond anyone's expectation, and Old Hungry Cat, acting as Brother Sharp's friend to protect him from being harmed by the public, grabbed Brother Sharp's hand and ran away from the crowd and cameras. The video stopped as they ran through the underground subway tunnel, while we could still hear Brother Sharp crying and murmuring something like a kid. This video proved some people's concerns about Brother Sharp being pushed to be a celebrity: is it really what he wants? Before the video came out, there were people asking questions like, "Does Brother Sharp know he is now a celebrity? He probably only notices that people who were keeping a distance with him are following and approaching him, with cameras and cigarettes. Will he be bored of life like this and hide from us?" (Little lazy pig with big dreams, 2010, February 28) As people started to seriously think about what was really good for Brother Sharp, this video provided a straightforward presentation of this homeless man. In contrast to those handsome pictures, Brother Sharp showed his fear and desperation in front of media.

Right after this video got released, the number of *weibo* posts about Brother Sharp

reached a peak, as more and more ordinary people started to realize how big a problem

this whole thing had become, not only for Brother Sharp, but also for everyone in their

society. Below are two ordinary posts on *weibo* that spoke for many people who viewed

this video:

> Don't know what to think after watching Brother Sharp's video. Which is better, to leave him alone, or to force him to accept official help? If we think about it again, what Brother Sharp was doing in the video proves to us that he is in serious lack of communication skills that we cannot even regard him a human being in the social sense. Then what can the society do to him? Nothing. (Anqing Lu Shisi, 2010, March 2)

> That's enough! Brother Sharp doesn't have to be entertained! Dumb officials! Dumb media! Dumb people passing by! (-Houzi Monkey-, 2010, March 2)

As the public collectively witnessed how incapable Brother Sharp was of

performing as a social person, and how incapable the government officials as well as

media practitioners were in front of the poor who needed basic help, the virtual network

gathered around Brother Sharp began to collapse. Random as he was, the relationship

between Brother Sharp and other social groups was so fragile that the extensity of the tie

between them was too weak to bring him to a very high social status. Though Brother

Sharp was promoted to a higher status than before, and was successfully reunited with his

family, his "fame" didn't last for long. Part of the reason is that Brother Sharp couldn't

function as a social person; therefore, he was bringing too much trouble for his family

and neighbors. While many were expecting more financial benefits to come with Brother

Sharp's fame, he actually upset nearly all the media and commercial corporations that

had invited him to programs and public activities, because he couldn't even understand

what he was asked to do. In the weeks after, we saw fewer and fewer posts about Brother

Sharp on *weibo*, among which most were asking people to stop following this poor man and give him back the quiet life. Therefore, Brother Sharp went "missing" in society once again. More sadly, the social group that Brother Sharp stands for, who could have possibly received enormous public attention and governmental help, was gradually forgotten, too. What the story of Brother Sharp brought him was a temporary happy ending of going back home, with the help of the digital capital that the public helped him accumulate in cyberspace. But what he couldn't obtain was enough trust from the public to apply within the huge network around him. This doesn't mean that people didn't believe in Brother Sharp. What people lost faith in was Brother Sharp's social ability, and his desire to be socialized. Therefore, most Chinese chose to stop following him or pushing him into the celebrity circle.

Brother Sharp didn't make into the elite level, but his story did show great possibility for people to cross the boundaries between original social statuses to higher or lower statuses by accumulating digital capital on the Internet. And one man did become a social elite because of the legend of Brother Sharp, though not for a long time. This man is the social activist and philanthropist Old Hungry Cat. Before Brother Sharp got famous, Old Hungry Cat was already well-accepted on local forums through the account of Wei Zhang, who often wrote about and showed great sympathy towards those in desperate situations, and advertised online for the public's helping hand. He had known Brother Sharp for a long time, and he sometimes would send food or money to him, or just check whether he was still doing fine. After the picture went viral online, Old Hungry Cat became well-known, too, no longer just locally, but nationally. He had become a symbol of a good person who selflessly helped the poor, and who could really understand what

Brother Sharp was looking for. That's why his words got reposted on *weibo* millions of times, with people commenting on him as an elite social activist who cared about others. Being in the center of Brother Sharp's network, Old Hungry Cat also enjoyed a rapidly growing social network around him, and he clearly knew how to take advantage of it. He constructed a perfect image of social activism online. According to his own narrative, he studied in Canada but didn't like the life abroad, so he came back to China after graduation. As the son of a rich family, he got 10,000 RMB a month from his parents to spend, so he decided to use the money on something good. He takes good care of homeless people, and they believe in him and even rely on him when things happen. According to Lin's (2001) model, the social tie between Old Hungry Cat and his contacts in the network is not very strong, so that his attained status got high enough and Old Hungry Cat finally crossed the boundary between ordinary people and elite during Brother Sharp's story. People who had been following Brother Sharp's story were also following Old Hungry Cat's words, as they automatically chose to believe in what Brother Sharp's friend said, rather than what the officials, or the media, were reporting. Old Hungry Cat got plenty of public exposure, so that some of his charity works started to get more response from other people. But Old Hungry Cat's elite status didn't last long. As his name was spoken by more and more people, some were curious about who this man wearing a baseball cap really was. Soon, people started to reveal the real identity of this Old Hungry Cat. In fact, Old Hungry Cat never went abroad to study, and was not from a wealthy family. On the contrary, he had very limited education and not a very proud life, and was having difficulty finding a decent job. Moreover, some spoke out online to reveal that this man had been taking advantage of his charity works to collect

money for himself, as he always used his own bank account for donation purposes, and never publicized any details about the public donation, or how indeed the money was spent on the poor. On March 5, Old Hungry Cat published his very last post on the online forum he was most active on, with the title "About Old Hungry Cat, about Brother Sharp, about the rumors on me: I hope these all go away with the wind." Since then, Old Hungry Cat, the online account, never spoke again. This is another important moment of boundary crossing: when a particular person, or online account, steps out of the elite circle and drops out of public attention completely. The education background and initial status of Old Hungry Cat suddenly dropped to the bottom level of society. People no longer followed him or his network; therefore, the higher social status he had attained immediately collapsed into nothing. The trust and huge network Old Hungry Cat built up around him as a "fake" successful social activist were so weak that he had no way to maintain them when too much public attention promoted him to a higher social status. And this story reminded the Chinese public to think seriously about the accountability of web celebrities, especially when they have no need to reveal their real identities to people. Clearly, only those who are able to obtain enough credibility among the public can live up to the title of web celebrity or social elite. As in Bourdieu's (1986) understanding, to title someone with more social capital is indeed to institutionalize him/her with more responsibility in the social network.

Therefore, I argue that the Brother Sharp legend has shown how flexible subject positions are in the society, yet how fragile certain social identities can become in front of a huge network. It is extremely difficult for ordinary people to cross the boundary and get close to or enter the elite circle. The crossing moments are exciting, for both the "lucky"

ones, and the huge public following them. But at the same time, these moments will

probably have only a very short-term effect, and the subjects soon find it impossible to

maintain the new identity with a higher social status. The case of Brother Sharp invites us

to think more about the negative effects of an online network. It is not Brother Sharp's

fault or failure that he couldn't make the best use of the digital capital generated in the

huge network. Rather, Brother Sharp is the one who sacrificed the most in this incident.

After all, he couldn't speak for himself. He was never willingly communicating with

others. Quite the contrary, he is merely an objective of communication within the

network, where everyone else tries to communicate with him, or perform acts like

communicating with him. Although it appears that Brother Sharp has been included in the

social network and promoted to a higher social level, this dark side of digital capital has

pushed Brother Sharp to an even worse situation, where he becomes a total outsider that

the public consumes with collective sympathy or excitement. But this is certainly not the

whole picture of China's contemporary society. Therefore, we need to look at the case of

Xuriyanggang as a comparison, for a more positive view of how different social identities

can merge and mobilize together in the social network.

The grassroots celebrity: *Xuriyanggang*

Within the past decade, many cases like Brother Sharp have emerged online and

immediately promoted someone to a web celebrity overnight. Xuriyanggang is one of the

most successful examples of ordinary people crossing the boundary to enter the elite

circle. In 2010, a video of two migrant workers singing the song "In Spring" got so many

clicks that every Chinese was talking about them. The video was recorded by their friend

with a cell phone. It featured a typical small apartment room on a construction site that

could only accommodate a few people, where one of the workers was sitting in bed playing guitar and singing, and the other was singing passionately in front of a microphone. The song was written and sung by a famous pop star in China, Feng Wang, and the lyric goes, "I still remember the Spring long ago…when I did not have credit cards or a home with hot water running 24 hours… I only had a broken wood guitar… and was singing the rhymes no one cared to ask about… If one day, I silently left, please bury me in this spring…" The quality of this video was not high-tech at all, as the resolution was low, and the background noise was significant. Neither of them had any clothes on their upper body, like most migrant workers in the hot summer without air conditioning. But the way they played music was serious, and their singing told a story for all the people who struggle towards a better life. The whole scene looked so plain and normal, as it was just one of the hot summer evenings spent by migrant workers. Yet it soon looked so different, as the two underprivileged suddenly invaded public attention with their beautiful voices and serious performance. They got famous not on a professional stage, but on a construction site in front of a phone camera. They were singing for all the migrant workers who dreamed of a better life, and they raised public acknowledgement and sympathy towards the people who were struggling at the bottom of the social hierarchy. People later realized that the two were named "Xuriyanggang" as a band, which was a combination of their real names and meant "rising sun." Singer Feng Wang and his song "In Spring" also got much more famous due to this video. Though Xuriyanggang never had any professional music training, their singing was indeed good enough to make people listen. Since then, they have continued to sing some other songs and posted their works online. Soon after the video became popular, Xuriyanggang was

invited to many television programs and commercial shows. The famous China Central

Television's reality show "Walk of Fame," which is a competition for grassroots talent to

show their skills and fight for their celebrity dreams, featured them in quite a few

episodes. They did so well that they finally won second place that year, and their names

and stories spread to every Chinese family, and they became the most influential

grassroots celebrities in China. They even appeared on the stage of the official Chinese

Spring Festival Gala of 2011 (Image 19), which is the one TV program that almost every

singer and actor dreams to be invited onto. Besides the collaboration with CCTV,

Xuriyanggang also maintained a good relationship with local TV stations by performing

Image 19 Xuriyanggang featured in Chinese Spring Festival Gala of 2011(Retrieved from
http://ent.people.com.cn/mediafile/201110/13/F201110131352397721126938.jpg,
August 22, 2016)

on various stages. Unlike Brother Sharp, Xuriyanggang had an agenda of promoting

themselves in public, hence they soon hired their own agency and marketing team.

Though they probably never received high education, much less any training in marketing and public relations, their team had everything necessary to broaden their network and maximize their positive influence and benefits for as long as possible. Their official *weibo* account has more than 409,000 followers as of May 2016, and is verified by *weibo* as a VIP user. In their posts, they show continuous enthusiasm for singing and making music, and also deep concern for how migrant workers can fight for the same rights as others living in big cities. The latter is of great importance for them, as they wouldn't have been considered good singers without their special social identities as migrant workers. Therefore, to maintain their higher social status, they will have to always connect themselves with the underprivileged, especially migrant workers, and try to fight for their rights and equality in society.

Xuriyanggang manage their *weibo* page in a very simple yet sincere way. The profile picture on their front page (Image 20) is a drawing of the two of them singing in their classic positions: one standing up with eyes closed and singing into the sky, the other sitting and playing a guitar, and both with bared upper body. In the background of the drawing are skyscrapers in the far distance. This clearly indicates Xuriyanggang's original social status. Xuriyanggang, together with thousands of other migrant workers, lived in the city of Beijing, but they were not really a part of the city life. They didn't even have a stable job, or an A/C for summer nights, and they didn't care if "more civilized" city residents would call them "country folks" when seeing their naked upper bodies. But they had a beautiful dream about music and they worked for it. The one-line introduction under the name "Xuriyanggang" reads, "Migrant workers' band, who were invited to CCTV Spring Festival Gala, who got second place in 'Walk of Fame'." The

introduction is not very long, but includes the most important identifying information for

them, and also the most important information they want to share with the public: They

were the most ordinary people, or even at the very bottom of the social hierarchy, and

have become successful musicians. It is indeed the boundary-crossing aspect that marks

Xuriyanggang's unique identity as people entering the elite circle from the bottom level.

With that single video getting more than 7 million clicks online, they quickly gathered a

huge social network that included many loyal fans, many with some interest in following

the ordinary people's path to an elite identity, and even some social elites, especially

music professionals, who gave Xuriyanggang respect and support. Xuriyanggang also

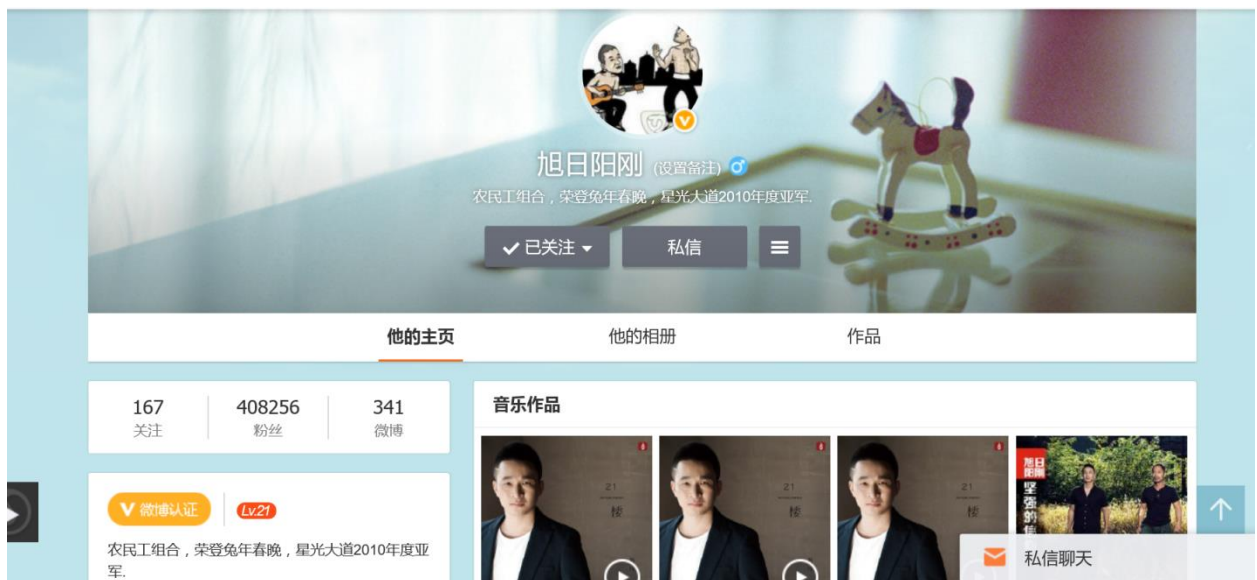chooses the dandelion seed wallpaper for their *weibo* page, which conveys peace and

Image 20 Xuriyanggang's *weibo* page with profile picture (Retrieved from
http://weibo.com/u/1847958501?topnav=1&wvr=6&topsug=1&is_all=1, August 22,
2016)

hope with its light blue color. Dandelion seeds perfectly represent what Xuriyanggang

stand for in this society: they grow as unwanted weeds, but can fly up high and into every

corner of the world. In contrast to people like Jianrong Yu, there is no education

background or employment information or title listed on Xuriyanggang's page. Apparently, Xuriyanggang have cleverly included only the information that is crucial for them to accumulate more digital capital to maintain their social status. From some of their posts, and others' interactions with them on *weibo*, we can get a better sense of how Xuriyanggang transform and mobilize their social identities to stay in the elite circle.

Xuriyanggang created this *weibo* account on November 5, 2010, but they didn't publish anything until December 21 of that year. Their very first *weibo* post says, "Life has been hectic these days, so we never got a chance to come here. Thank you for all the attention. We would like to say to each of you that please stay well, and we appreciate your support" (Xuriyanggang, 2010, December 21). This post uses the plainest words in Chinese, as someone with not much literary training would use. There is no correct punctuation in this post, and Xuriyanggang simply use the black dot of English grammar wherever the sentence needs to be stopped. This is very understandable, as for one, the Internet is a free space for people to write in a more random way, and for the other, as two men who didn't get much education, Xuriyanggang are not expected to write like college professors or news practitioners. Among the 279 comments this post received, most of them are warm greetings or excited applause from ordinary people, with some identifying themselves with Xuriyanggang, or as a loyal fan of them. JoyL426 (2010, December 29) comments, "Fighting! I burst into tears after watching your video. In fact I am also an ordinary migrant worker. But we are also very proud of ourselves. I only pray for your happiness, nothing else. Wish that each of us who is far away from home stays healthy and well. Anything else means nothing." A number of comments give Xuriyanggang good advice on how to develop their professional career. For example, a

user called "Wuyue de gangbeng'er" (2010, December 28) says, "Please do not be bewildered by so many applause online. The applause came to you fast, but can also leave you before you know. A medal or a single incident does not determine how long your career will be. Many important factors altogether promote a celebrity like Feng Wang to sustain his position in this field. You will eventually need to prove yourself with your own ability, and your own works. I hope you will always know what you are doing. Fans can go crazy, but idols cannot. Otherwise you will just get lost in this society." This reads like a teacher telling students what to avoid, or a more experienced person telling a newcomer the rules of living in the field. Such comments and posts are not commonly seen to be addressed to other more established social elites, simply because elites usually have mastered more social knowledge and skills. Elites are the ones who give advice instead of receiving advice. Xuriyanggang's grassroots status makes them different from other elites, and that's why people who care about them, and the grassroots, want to talk with them frankly. Xuriyanggang is aware of their unique identity, and their modesty has helped them in maintaining this identity. JObama, an ordinary *weibo* user, reposted Xuriyanggang's post about their show in "Walk of Fame," and commented, "Yes. Always remember that it was those from the bottom of the society who loved you and promoted you to become celebrities. Please sing sincerely to them. Treat music as your career. Do not think of yourselves as some super stars. Otherwise you won't have any market in China" (Xuriyanggang, 2011, January 28). Usually a celebrity wouldn't necessarily pay much attention to a comment like that, but Xuriyanggang, surprisingly, replied to JObama that, "It is indeed wrong to think of ourselves as super stars. A person cannot forget his most difficult days" (Xuriyanggang, 2011, January 28). There is

actually a typo in this post. If the typo was by a college professor, readers probably would

have pointed it out and laughed at this mistake, and the professor would have

immediately corrected it. But for Xuriyanggang and their followers, this is not important

at all. This is who they are. Moreover, this single post implies to their audience that they

will always remember where they are from, and keep working for people like them. Their

attitude touched the public deeply, and so more people started to follow them on *weibo*,

not only for their music, but also for their daily life, their thoughts and concerns.

Embracing more followers is much different than receiving more clicks on their videos,

as clicks are so random that people could just watch for fun, without really caring who

they are. Followers take Xuriyanggang more seriously, and that's how most of the digital

capital was produced. In their posts, Xuriyanggang have learned to constantly repost

relevant information from official media accounts, like CCTV, and some well-established

social elites, especially those in entertainment. They often mention these social elites in

their own posts, too. It is their strategy to attract more attention by actively reaching out,

hence more bridging social capital is created from such practices. While many other elites

tend to only mention and respond to those who are in the same circle, Xuriyanggang take

more initiative to include ordinary people in their higher social level. Like one of the

users said, "This is the power of grassroots. I watched the video of Xuriyanggang's *In*

Spring today, and then read through their *weibo*, they are good people! Art belongs to all

the people! Xuriyanggang is also very modest. I commented on their post, and they

replied a *thank you* to me, that's so much appreciated! @Xuriyanggang" (Li Huiqian,

2010, December 29). It is true that Xuriyanggang often randomly pick some comments to

reply to, like any ordinary user. But very rarely do we see well-established celebrities

reply to ordinary people's words on *weibo*. Though their writing is plain, and sometimes even mistaken, people like reading them as they deliver the power of the grassroots, for the grassroots.

To look through their page, about half of the posts are about their music and performance, a quarter of their posts are random greetings or expressions, and the other quarter are about social concerns and charity works. They show great concern for kids, peasants, and other underprivileged social groups, especially migrant workers who struggle in big cities. Once in a while, they call themselves migrant workers, or claim to represent migrant workers, or post some pictures of migrant workers working hard and call for social attention on them. The songs they make often tell stories of people who struggle for their dreams, like *In Spring*. In these ways, Xuriyanggang have successfully constructed their social identities as elites transforming from grassroots and continuing to look like grassroots; and at the same time as two ordinary people, who struggle for big dreams and have successfully crossed the boundary. This seemingly paradoxical case perfectly fits into Ramos-Pinto's (2007) ascribed characteristics of networks and norms in generating social capital, in which he argues that we should "see bonding and bridging relations as two ends of a scale, rather than mutually exclusive conditions" (p. 61). In the process of accumulating enormous digital capital to cross the boundary, what is crucial for Xuriyanggang is not high education or high initial status, but their ongoing effort in bonding and bridging with various social groups at the same time. The first video helped them get started with a big online network, and their way of maintaining this network keeps getting them more public attention from every corner of society. The trust they've received is so abundant that they can easily mobilize around various social groups, and

include people from both the highest and lowest levels of society into their network. After stepping into the elite circle, they didn't abandon their grassroots brothers and sisters. Therefore, a wider radius of trust is created due to their unique way of interacting with ordinary people as elites. In May 2016, Xuriyanggang participated in the "super" version of "Walk of Fame," which invited the most famous celebrities who walked into the elite circle via this TV program over the years. Xuriyanggang was ranked in first place after the first episode, and again became a hot topic on *weibo*.

After the crossing moments: the mobilization of social identities

It is believed that "while vertical relations have the potential to link between different strata and create synergy, they can also facilitate relations of dependence and subjugation" (Ramos-Pinto, 2007, p. 61). In our cases of Brother Sharp and Xuriyanggang, we have seen how different power dynamics can be in the transformation process of social identities, and what kind of mobilization and collective actions are anticipated as a result of such a transformation. Putnam (1993) argues that "a vertical network, no matter how dense and no matter how important to its participants, cannot sustain social trust and cooperation" (p. 174), and the story of Brother Sharp clearly proves this argument. It seemed very promising at first, when every Chinese citizen started to take out their phones to take pictures of Brother Sharp and publish *weibo* posts about rescuing Brother Sharp and thousands of homeless people in China. But soon after social groups from higher levels in the power hierarchy became actively engaged in this collective activity, especially those government officials from the local social aid station and Old Hungry Cat, people started to realize it was not necessarily a good thing to link Brother Sharp with others. Brother Sharp's screaming into the sky woke up many

Chinese citizens. It is true that Brother Sharp benefited from this vertical network both

socially and economically, as he successfully reunited with his family and was later

invited to some shows and programs. It is also true that ordinary Chinese citizens

benefited from this vertical network by collectively lending a hand for a greater society.

But who benefited the most in this network? When the government officials approached

Brother Sharp with cameras and recorders, when they kept asking him to go with them

without showing any real sympathy, it was clear that government officials needed

Brother Sharp to comply with them so that they could take credit from higher officials

and the public. When Old Hungry Cat repeatedly prevented Brother Sharp from

accepting any kid of social aid, and kept him away from the public, as if Brother Sharp

was his personal property, the public started to question what Old Hungry Cat's

motivation really was. Later, with some ordinary people who had had contact with Old

Hungry Cat speaking out to reveal his strategy of donation fraud, the public understood

that Brother Sharp was just another poor person for Old Hungry Cat to take advantage of.

In this vertical network that connected people from every corner in China, Brother Sharp

was supposed to be at the center point and take a leading role. But he didn't even have

the basic ability to communicate with others, or to make a decision on his own. He was

pushed into this network before he understood what happened. He was suddenly granted

a huge amount of social capital that he didn't know how to make use of to empower

himself. It gave those with higher social statuses the chance to force him to comply, and

to accept the new social identity that they wanted him to be. Therefore, Chinese citizens

decided to collectively draw back and no longer be entertained by or consume Brother

Sharp. This online legend ended quietly in a way that people wouldn't have foreseen at

the very beginning. Even now, when the news reports that Brother Sharp has been missing again for over a year, no excitement is ignited among the public. We can argue that collectively stepping back is actually the public's collective action in rescuing Brother Sharp. But with a web celebrity who accumulated so much fame and such a huge social network in China, people originally hoped to see more promising results out of their collective action.

Of course, it is not the social network to blame, and vertical networks don't always necessarily lead to negative effects for the transformation and mobilization of social identities. Like what Ramos-Pinto (2007) claims, horizontal networks could be more restricted than vertical networks (p. 65), and the key to look at is "how the degree of 'vertality' of a relationship intersects with other elements of social capital, such as norms and identities" (p. 61). The fundamental difference between Brother Sharp and Xuriyanggang is indeed their subject positions in the network and how they build up and maintain positive norms and identities in it. Xuriyanggang's network is no less "vertical" than Brother Sharp's. They have all effectively gathered multiple social groups, including government officials, media practitioners, celebrities, ordinary people, and those who struggle at the very bottom of society. The difference is, Brother Sharp's identity is isolated as a unique entity, an object for all the others to look at and talk about. Though he is being surrounded by all kinds of people, he very rarely has any interactions with them. The relationship between Brother Sharp and others is too random to sustain any stable and promising social norms. Therefore, the huge network around him is fragile. On the contrary, Xuriyanggang are able to construct *overarching identities*, which "can be constructed or mobilized in order to link groups with different identities or in very

different positions of power structures" (Ramos-Pinto, 2007, p. 66). Xuriyanggang don't really publish many *weibo* posts, especially compared with many other celebrities, who tend to use *weibo* as a platform to promote themselves. Part of the reason, I suppose, is due to their lack of literary knowledge and technical skills. But all of their posts keep confirming for the public who they are, in a simple and powerful way. In October 2015, Xuriyanggang posted 16 *weibo* in total. As normal singers would do, they spent quite some time advertising for their concert (4 posts), their new songs (3 posts), and the social activities they took a leading part in (1 post). They specifically posted 1 message to deliver their appreciation to the fans. There was also 1 post greeting all Chinese on China's National Day, and another post showed their concern about a social incident regarding senior minority citizens in China. These are all commonly seen on any celebrity's *weibo* page. The 2 posts that really implicated Xuriyanggang's unique identities were the ones talking about local peasants from their rural hometowns. One post was trying to get more people interested in their traditional snack, fried oil bread, and the other promoting their local pomegranates. The special attention on local peasants helps Xuriyanggang become the bridge between them and other social groups, especially the potential consumers from cities. This not only indirectly produces more social capital for local peasants, who don't necessarily need to go online for promotion and feedback, but also gives Xuriyanggang more credit as people caring for the underprivileged, hence more digital capital to make use of. Moreover, these 2 posts are not random. Xuriyanggang have shown continuous interest in helping people like these local peasants, probably because they still consider themselves peasants and their families are indeed still working in the field. By doing this, Xuriyanggang keep building up their images as

people who are not proud of their fame, and who never forget who they are. Therefore, the public see them as people who they can trust and rely on to speak for ordinary people. In the vertical network that Xuriyanggang constructs within the public, though the difference between multiple social statuses is big, or even at its maximum, this *vertality* doesn't negate the significance of social norms and network values at all. Therefore, it is easier for Xuriyanggang to accrue enough digital capital and maintain their new social identities in front of different people. In the following month, November 2015, Xuriyanggang only published 5 *weibo* posts in total, including only 1 promoting their music, and 4 on social issues. The first post in November was calling for public attention on the issue of migrant workers having difficulty getting train tickets back home around Chinese New Year, which had been a common problem that every Chinese had to face every year. The second post was reposting a new call for local peasants to reduce the amount of corn planting, and Xuriyanggang commented, "What else to plant then?" as if they were planning for their families (Xuriyanggang, 2015, November 13). With the third post reposting and supporting a charity account's recent program for animal protection, the last post in November by Xuriyanggang was applauding President Xi's new talk on pushing local governments to make real moves to overcome poverty. Xuriyanggang simply posted the link to a news report on the talk, and then commented one word, "GOOD!" (Xuriyanggang, 2015, November 30) Their posts are always short and simple, but can deliver very powerful messages. Because they care for what the underprivileged care for, and they speak what the minorities hope to be heard. They never post what food they are eating now as celebrities, instead, they only talk about what people in their rural hometowns are eating and planting. Pictures on *weibo* always show them in basic clothes,

without any makeup or ties or fancy glasses. They certainly can afford better foods and luxury brands now, but they understand what they represent, and what people wish them to represent. They have done a good job in maintaining their overarching identities to connect and mobilize around many different power dynamics, including the government and the most underprivileged, whose voices usually get neglected. By engaging with different identities, Xuriyanggang have also found a perfect place for themselves to rest on and balance between higher and lower levels in the society. Unlike what most other celebrities' *weibo* pages, where oftentimes we see celebrities' fans debating with their haters in hundreds of thousands of replies, Xuriyanggang's page gets much less yet more positive or neutral response. What Xuriyanggang have brought to Chinese society is not only a legend of ordinary people crossing the boundary to enter the elite circle, but more importantly a simple yet significant power in mobilizing around the society to create greater trust within the public network.

Conclusion

With the comparison of the two cases of *Brother Sharp* and *Xuriyanggang*, we can get a better sense of how ordinary people could become well-known to the public overnight, and what such a moment of boundary-crossing really means to them and to society. Plenty of clicks online do have the ability to bring someone to a higher social status, but only if he/she knows how to clearly construct and mobilize the new social identity with more social accountability, can he/she get close to the elite circle, or even enter the elite circle. The legend of Brother Sharp did bring him back home for a few years, and some financial benefits did come along with his fame, but it was ultimately just a story of someone else, which did not resonate within the society. People don't even

remember what Brother Sharp's real name is. After all, Brother Sharp was just a topic, or an objective of a topic for the public. He was never able to speak out for himself, or gain control of any discourse generated around him. Xuriyanggang, on the other hand, know clearly how to communicate with others and mobilize among the public. They have received much support from both ordinary people and elites, due to their successful practices with overarching identities, and their hard work in maintaining various identities within society. Their identities are extremely flexible, and different social groups find Xuriyanggang's story not only touching, but also encouraging. In Ostrom and Ahn's (2009) analysis on the meaning of social capital, they emphasize the essential role of trust in accumulating social capital, which can further lead to effective collective actions. They claim that besides contextual variables, the amount of trust that one obtains depends on trustworthiness, networks, and institutions (p. 22-23). And by institution, they are referring to rules that members of the network agree on, including written rules like laws, or unwritten ones that people learn to live with (p. 28). Apparently, the reason that Brother Sharp wasn't able to lead collective actions within the society is because he doesn't have the capacity to speak to or for the public, much less to sustain enough trust from the public. Therefore, the huge network around him was too weak for powerful social capital to grow. His mental illness further prevented him from following even the most basic rules as a social human being. It is not to anyone's surprise that Brother Sharp only stayed in public attention for a short period of time. And it is to some extent better for him to keep away from the public. On the contrary, Xuriyanggang have learned how to master and enhance their discursive power in the society. They have successfully transformed their identities by continuously obtaining more trust within a wide network,

and more importantly, by complying with the rules that various social groups have set up for them. With the help of the process of being named as Xuriyanggang, and being titled as a migrant workers' band, and being institutionalized as a grassroots power that carries a promising dream for China, Xuriyanggang have become a symbol that every Chinese can put their individual hope and trust into. In a way, every Chinese citizen, elite or not, could become a Xuriyanggang. But this doesn't mean that Xuriyanggang's case can be easily copied for another successful Cinderella story. In March 2016, a new *weibo* account, *sunshine girls' band*, grabbed much public attention. It was a "band" of 5 middle school girls coming out of nowhere. The song they published online does not show their music talent, and from the video of their "news conference" people can only see five girls too young to understand what they are really initiating. They just kept asserting online their belief of dreams coming true, as if the single act of naming themselves as a band and posting some of their singing online could, and should, make them become good singers. They did gain a huge amount of clicks and comments during those days, but people were just mocking them, or urging them to go back to school and do what they were supposed to do. To the Chinese public, this *sunshine girls' band* was a joke, and it was just a plotted marketing strategy on the part of the company behind the girls. But to the five girls, it seemed to really be a good chance for them to become celebrities. They didn't understand that clicks wouldn't necessarily bring fame, and that it would take a good amount of hard work and responsibility to become elite.

Xuriyanggang's case is not accidental. The trust they have attained is not based on luck, and the social network they have constructed is stable. They are not the only ones

benefiting from their encouraging story. The whole Chinese society benefits from it, as it offers a chance for everyone to communicate and mobilize within the society.

In this sense, maybe every Chinese is already Xuriyanggang. What Xuriyanggang represent is not the elite status they have maintained, but the fact that the construction of social identities is a fluid process full of possibilities, and each of us within the network should find our own standing points and perform agency as responsible citizens. Does this imply that China is embracing more informed citizens than before? Or is China witnessing more collective action as a result of collaborations among different social groups? The transformation and mobilization of elite identities, as well as other individual or collective identities within the social hierarchy, have indeed opened up more space for different voices to be heard, but the power dynamics among these voices remain complicated, and oftentimes imbalanced. This is exactly the dark side of digital capital, which has muted Brother Sharp in society. Even though he is in the center of a huge network, he is socially excluded. The following chapter examines the impacts of elites' identity construction and transformation in China's society. In particular, how do elites interact with ordinary people online? What role do elites play in forming and framing public opinion? To me, these are the last, yet the most important, questions to ask when exploring the power structures in China's society, both online and offline.

CHAPTER 6

IMPLICATIONS ON CITIZENSHIP IN CHINA

After exploring the process of the construction of elites' identities, and the potential for different social identities to transform and mobilize within the social hierarchy, the next step is to ask what the construction, transformation, and mobilization of elite identities mean to our society. In examining how new media and technology have changed the norms of Chinese citizenry, Yu (2008) argues that Chinese netizens are transitioning from an active audience, who passively acquire their rights in response to state media, to media citizens, who consciously participate into the storytelling process on the Internet (p. 115). But to Yu, media citizenry only exists in the virtual imaginary. When going offline, they are still controlled or interpellated by the state power (p. 116). The case of Brother Sharp has proven this statement of Yu wrong, as we can see that an online story does have the power to initiate collective offline activities, which directly affect how the story unfolds both online and offline. What is of great importance for my research here is Yu's special attention on the relationship between new media and citizenship in China, especially how elites mobilize ordinary people with the help of new technologies. Seeing the advantages that are granted to social elites, Yu points out the "elitist tendency" in China, which is reinforced in media citizenship by privileging a small minority (urban, educated, and male) (p. 117). In this sense, Yu concludes that, "new media and communication technologies serve as both resources for action and channels for regulating the citizenry" (p. 118). By "regulation," Yu refers to the strict online censorship by the Chinese government, as well as the impact of elites on public opinions; by resources, Yu puts hope in the Internet as a platform for media citizenship to

emerge and grow. I consider media citizenship a critical way to investigate Chinese citizenship. And it is of great importance to look at what elites' identity construction and transformation have contributed to the formation of (media) citizenship in China. Therefore, in this chapter, I would like to go even further in looking at how elites and ordinary people work together in shaping and re-shaping Chinese citizenship. Especially, how do different social groups view the role of elites' identities? How do elites interact with ordinary people on *weibo*? Following Yu's framework, I will examine how the Internet acts as both resource and regulation in constructing the power dynamics between elites and other social groups, especially in the formation of public opinion.

The definition of "citizenship" has long been a complicated topic. A legal understanding of citizenship is in relation to a certain nation in which the citizen receives both rights and responsibility politically, economically, and socially. Scholars have put forward concepts like "cultural citizenship," "sexual citizenship," and "corporate citizenship" to examine citizenship from various angles (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2008, p. vii). Marshall (1964) divides "citizenship" into three elements, which have been widely cited by scholars:

> The civil element is composed of the rights necessary for individual freedom—liberty of the person, freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice… This shows us that the institutions most directly associated with civil rights are the courts of justice. By the political element I mean the right to participate in the exercise of political power, as a member of a body invested with political authority or as an elector of the members of such a body. The corresponding institutions are parliament and councils of local government. By the social element I mean the whole range from the right to the modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society. The institutions most closely connected with it are the educational system and the social services. (p. 71-72)

As evidenced by previous chapters, these three elements echo the process of identity construction on the Internet: by accumulating digital capital in civil and social venues, different social identities attain their designated political positions in the social hierarchy. Elites, oftentimes as a bonding and bridging power between different social groups, perform a vital role in the construction of media citizenship. Scholars interested in the development of citizenship, whether in China or the West, are prone to examine the role of elites, as well as the function of media in the social construction of citizenship. Here, I would like to first go over some theories on how citizenship is measured in this social construction, and then put special emphasis on how elites' identity formation impacts our understanding of citizenship in China, especially with the development of new technologies in contemporary culture.

Although focusing on the history of American civic life, Schudson's (1998) book offers a good example of how to examine changing citizenship within a historical lens. Schudson explains the change in the expectation of a good citizen from deference to gentlemen to a monitorial citizen, with special attention on the changing power dynamics between citizens and social elites. Schudson's observation on "who owns politics" in the post-Progressive Era is very helpful in understanding Chinese culture. Schudson argues that big business, political leaders, experts, and media all have great power in political issues, "but a century of political reforms and political contention notwithstanding, the party remains a powerful claimant for defining political life" (p. 274). This depicts a fundamental and comprehensive picture of how social elites, political parties, and other institutions compete yet work with each other in society.

In the late 1980s, Entman (1989) believes that "most of the population finds politics a remote and unengaging concern" (p. 24); therefore, the lack of informed citizenship is holding back a responsible free press, which should have power over politics. The most inspiring part is Entman's examination of the power dynamics between media, citizens and elites:

> So the media not only influence the actual preferences that members of the public use in voting and other forms of active participation. They also affect perceived public opinion. Since elites respond to the public sentiments they perceive, Americans passively 'participate' through leaders' reactions to perceived public opinion. (p. 87)

Sunstein (2006) pushes this issue a step forward to talk about the problems of deliberation in groupthink. Expert deliberation often leads to polarization, partly due to informational influence and social pressure. Even in the Internet era, citizens tend to very easily fall into an "information cocoon," which means they only read and accept those information and opinions they already agree with.

Janack's (2008) critical case study of American campaign blogs backs up Sunstein's (2006) argument with empirical evidence. Through analyzing *Blog For America* during 2004 US presidential campaign, Janack argues that although the Internet does provide a better chance for participatory democracy and even a Habermasian ideal public sphere, the bloggers have collectively formed "a self-disciplining system in which comments that promoted the goals and echoed the strategies of the campaign were encouraged and those that did not were discouraged through subtle and not-so-subtle disciplinary strategies" (p. 93). Therefore, "citizens' rationality is circumscribed by political interests and power relations even under circumstances where conditions encourage rational-critical interaction" (p. 93).

All these theories provide valuable insights for investigating public discussions in China. However, we will have to acknowledge the unique characteristics of China's media practices before borrowing Western ideologies to frame our thoughts. Seeing the fact that many researchers blindly follow Western theoretical models to analyze Chinese citizens, some argue for a more closed investigation of the structural constitution of civil citizenship with consideration given to special conditions in China (Lv, 2002). Goldman and Perry (2002) have done a good job tracing back the history of China to talk about "Changing Meanings of Citizenship in Modern China." They refer to Marshall's (1964) and others' phenomenal works on citizenship as theoretical foundations, and at the same time try to cover all aspects of China's history and society to analyze what is really taking place. The book covers a historical review from imperial and republican China to the People's Republic of China to talk about the transition of political participation in different eras. It covers the geographical locations of Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, in order to compare representations of economic, civil, and political citizenship in accordance with various political environments and policies. It also covers critical special topics like urbanization, commercialization, globalization, identity formation, and gender issues in China to examine how the meanings of citizenship have been changing with the transition of social norms. This compilation is valuable in understanding Chinese history with special attention on the transition of citizenship. But the discussion of media, especially the Internet, is missing in this book. Many works on contemporary citizenship in China fail to examine the influence of the Internet on people's daily practices. Many of them focus on the transition of citizenship in China, with special attention on structural constitution, or individual consciousness. Some put more emphasis on citizens'

consciousness rather than political rights (Zeng, 2001; Jin, 2005). Keane (2001) argues that Chinese citizenship, unlike in the Western tradition, only emphasizes citizens' socio-economic rights, while neglecting the political connotations of citizenship. That's why Yu's (2008) article, as mentioned before, presents the great importance of exploring how new media and technology have changed the norms of citizenry in China, especially any change in citizens' political consciousness and participation. The following section will introduce a couple of cases of online popular talks, to examine how elites' identities are mobilizing around different social groups with the Internet acting both as resource and regulation for Chinese citizens.

What are online popular talks?

With the development of technology, online popular talks have been emerging rapidly in China in the past decade. Sometimes referred to as *Internet slang*, online popular talks are words, phrases, or sentences that first acquire broad usage on the Internet among various groups of people, and then attract public attention and discussion, even in people's daily lives. Popular talks normally originate in random creation based on daily observation, knowledge about certain areas, social incidents, or even just a typo in the chat room. They could last for several years, or merely a couple of weeks. These popular talks first appear as simple characters or phrases, which are usually substitutions for politically or morally sensitive words. As introduced in the opening chapter, the Chinese government hires many Internet administrators to monitor online content in a timely manner. Sensitive speech and topics won't stay available for long. Chinese people constantly create words and language to replace the sensitive ones, in order to get around the strict censorship. Now, very rarely do we see people typing "和谐" (the Chinese word

for harmony) in their posts. Instead, they use "河蟹" (the Chinese word for river crab), the funny non-political sensitive word to refer to the government agenda. Generally, the most commonly used and influential talks will have a direct relationship with or implicate recent social or political issues. It is considered a new way for Chinese citizens to express alternative opinions aside from the mainstream narrative of social incidents. The two case studies introduced below are from this category of online talks, which embody a political concern. They both have attracted so much public attention that people are using them as a symbol of certain cultural meanings across time, space, and incidents. They also involve multiple social groups, which could possibly embody complicated power relations among ordinary people, elites, and the government. Online popular talks have expanded into the political realm as well as people's daily life; the unbelievable speed of dissemination ensures a much broader acceptance, a much greater number of these talks, and most importantly, more significant influence on citizens' thoughts and experiences.

(1) *Geili*

Geili is originally from a Chinese dialect meaning "awesome" or "exciting," which was rarely known to most Chinese citizens. "Gei" (给), the first character, means "to give;" and "li" (力), the second character, means "power." It first gained public attention in May 2010, when it appeared in a Chinese-dubbed Japanese comic animation. People soon found the word especially useful in expressing a strong emotion, no matter in chatting about trivial experiences or commenting on political issues. During the World Cup in June and July, 2010, soccer fans were using *geili* or *bu geili* ("bu," "不," means "not") to talk about the game so much that this word stepped beyond cyberspace into our physical life. On November 10, 2010, to everyone's surprise, the first title on the front

page of *People's Daily* read: "Jiangsu Geili 'Cultural Province'" (Zhao, 2010). The

appearance of *geili* on this high-rank government oriented newspaper in China, marked

the day that this online talk invaded mainstream discourse. This soon became *the* news of

the day, which not only made more Chinese citizens aware of online popular talks, but

also made them think collectively about what it means to see the combination of a Party-

ruled newspaper and popular civil culture. Several other local newspapers also followed

this example to use *geili* in their reports. Meanwhile, Chinglish[8] words *gelivable* and

ungelivable were created to indicate something awesome or dissatisfying and entered

mainstream media coverage, both in and out of China. On November 18 of 2010, a blog

about *geili* (Geili, 2010) appeared on Schott's Vocab on *The New York Times* website,

which traced the origin and development of this popular word. The case of *geili* is just

one of many which indicate how Chinese citizens are witnessing their own collective

agency being recognized and accepted in public space, even by mainstream ideology. It is

so influential that it has now become a common word with an established (political)

meaning that Chinese citizens use in their daily life, both online and offline.

(2) "My dad is Li Gang."

In an online poll on *Tianya* (one of the most popular online forums in China) in

December 2010, "My dad is Li Gang" was voted by netizens to be the number one

popular talk in China ('My dad is Li Gang' was voted as number one online popular talk

in 2010, 2010). Profound political meanings come along with this seemingly simple

sentence, as it derives from a social incident that initiated huge public discussion on a

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[8] "Chinglish" refers to English words that are adapted from or influenced by Chinese language.

special social group of *guan erdai*[9] (官二代). On October 16, 2010, a young driver hit

two college girls in Hebei University, killing one and injuring the other. Among several

versions of what happened that night, the most widely circulated one had that the car

driver, Li Qiming (who also goes by the name Li Yifan), continued driving to pick up his

girlfriend after hitting the girls, as if nothing happened. When students and security

guards tried to stop him, he did not show any concern for the two girls he hit, but shouted

arrogantly: "Go sue me! My dad is Li Gang!" Later, by *human flesh search*, people found

out that Li Qiming's dad Li Gang was a director of the local police department. Chinese

citizens got mad, and began to follow the news as a collective activity. However, though

it was said that a number of students witnessed the accident, none of them would tell

what really happened to the police or journalists, because the university had asked them

not to. Seeing the truth being suppressed, netizens began to criticize Li Qiming and the

unfair social systems by creating poems, songs, and videos with his notorious line, "My

dad is Li Gang," in hopes of pressuring the government towards justice. On January 30,

2011, Li Qiming was sentenced to 6 years in jail, in addition to economic compensation

to the victims' family (Peace-breaker of Hebei University car accident Li Qiming is

sentenced 6 years in jail, 2011, paragraph 1). Even though there are other versions of the

"truth" of the story, which claim that the media had intentionally exaggerated how Li

Qiming reacted, "My dad is Li Gang" has since then become a line to satirize the

abnormal justice system in China, which allows those who possess higher political power

to go beyond laws and citizens. It is a representative incident out of many online popular

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[9] "Guan erdai" is a newly created word that means "the second generation of government officials." People now use this term to criticize the phenomenon that a "guan erdai" is usually superior to their peers in social and economic status, whereas they tend to violate moral standards or even laws without being punished.

talks that aim to break through *ungelivable* political policies, social issues, or business decisions. They have become a rapid and phenomenal bottom-up way to disseminate citizens' voices. Any citizen could become a journalist to report or at least participate in the storytelling of this social incident.

Above are just two examples from the growing category of online popular talks that could lead us to a closer look at the power dynamics among different social groups in China. They not only tell a story of how citizens could work collectively in public towards a certain social or political agenda, but also tell a story of how this agenda is initiated, framed, and operated by various groups of people. In a sense, the rapid growth of online popular talks in China and the enormous social impact they have indicate the collective power that Chinese citizens could seize in contemporary culture. Chinese citizens are taking advantage of this power by networking with each other, and more importantly, with people with higher social statuses. But is everything always so optimistic? How do elites interact with ordinary people online in framing public discussions? Is the elitist tendency mentioned by Yu (2008) being challenged at all? So let's take a look at how collaborations take place between elites and other social groups, and how different people mobilize around the huge network with multiple identities to achieve certain social and political statuses.

Network citizenship: Internet as resourceful regulation

State regulation of the Internet is always a controversial issue, especially when talking about China. Severe censorship prohibits Chinese citizens from using certain characters or words to indicate sensitive, usually political, meanings online. But the overall regulation has also created opportunities for citizens to act collectively against, or

at least to find leeway in, the censorship. That's why online popular talks first emerged in China as a promising cultural phenomenon, such that expressions like "river crab" would be created to stand for "harmony" in online writings. The invention of online popular talks is not merely for fun. They function as a valid approach to get around strict censorship and form a new resource for citizens to imply certain meanings. With more citizens having Internet access, to some extent, online popular talks empower citizens to be included, or to actively initiate and participate in public discourse.

With the guarantee that more people are using the Internet in China, we could anticipate more people to be involved in the formation of public discussion through online channels, for example through engaging with the emergence, interpretation, and dissemination of popular talks. The appearance of *geili* on *People's Daily*, as mentioned above, brings a popular street slang up into mainstream discourse. The following appearance of *bu geili*, *gelivable*, and *ungelivable* forms a transition point at which the popular talk grabs international attention. This brings the officially recognized popular talk *geili* back to Chinese citizens with a much wider influence, which extends to those who don't usually feel attached to online communication. More people are using *bu geili* or *ungelivable* to mock a random experience, or to criticize a public figure or political issue. It indicates a way for Chinese citizens to get connected with each other and get into public discourse with their own language. It is a language invented by nobody yet for everybody. It is a language that could possibly be spoken by everyone and is hopefully speaking for everyone. It is a language that, different from the languages generated officially by the government, eventually bridges grassroots' voice with mainstream discourse.

Google Trends provides a good database for us to look into how online popular

talks attract and lose collective interest over time. When I type in the Chinese characters

of *geili*, "给力," the result (see image below) shows that in December 2010 and January
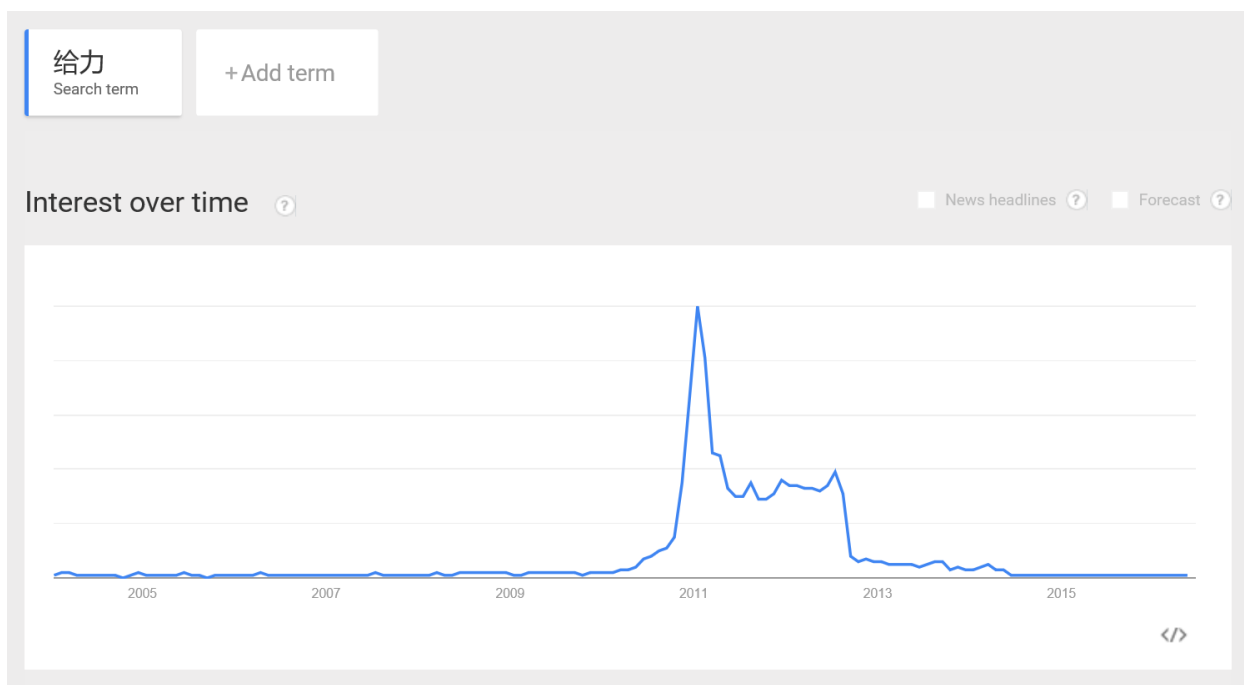

Image 21 Interest in *geili* over time. (Search result of *geili*, 2016)

2011, people's interest in this word and the usage of it came to a peak. With the

abovementioned *People's Daily* news being released in late November of 2010, we

should be able to assume that it was this leading newspaper that played a significant role

in promoting *geili* among Chinese. Moreover, when I search the usage of *geili* on *weibo*, I

find that before the word became popular, most of the times it was used as a verb, which

simply means to give power. After the headline in the news uses *geili* as an adjective,

more people, who probably don't really understand the origin of *geili* in local dialect,

start to use *geili* to modify a noun. As an elite agency, *People's Daily* takes the initiative

to present a resource that every Chinese has the opportunity to mobilize around for a big

network. With the help of the Internet, this network soon became so huge that it gained enormous digital capital for both *People's Daily* and ordinary Chinese to attain higher social status. *People's Daily* was then regarded as a mainstream newspaper that not only reports on the rigid government agenda, but also speaks in a language that people can understand. Being included in the network, Chinese citizens benefit by sharing the opportunity to be more politically sensitive and participate in public discourse. *Geili*, as a random dialect that nobody would have cared about, accidentally became a bridge between the local and central, between ordinary people and the elites. It is now accepted as a common word that people would use every day, with a special connotation of being politically aware. After all, the development of advanced technologies and new media extends the possibility of Chinese citizens' cultural and political visibility both online and offline. And the elite circle, with *People's Daily* as a representative here, plays a leading role in building up the network for everyone to share the resource, hence generate more digital capital within the network.

The case of "My dad is Li Gang" depicts a more complicated picture of how different social groups use the Internet as a resource, and work together to form public discussions. Advanced technology has pushed the story of "My dad is Li Gang" onto center stage so that every Chinese is able to see and judge it. The Internet also provides enough information for the public to collectively *human flesh search* Li Gang and his family. It has been a very popular method for Chinese citizens to dig someone out of the crowd, and to reveal what he or she has done. *Human flesh search* is often followed by *weiguan*, which invites everyone to stand around and watch. In this case, Chinese citizens were *weiguan*ing Li Gang and his son's past and future actions, as well as the justice

system of China. *Weiguan* does not require any extra action besides simply clicking relevant news and stories, so it can be very effectively formed online. Participants who collectively *weiguan* usually form a large yet fluid group constituted of various social identities. The large number and fluidity allow *weiguan*, on one hand, to pull concealed social factors into public, and on the other hand, to push citizens' invisible online actions to become widely visible.

And there is, and needs to be, someone occupying the center of the network and continuously providing information to others. In this case, many journalists who devoted much of their time to the mystery of this tragedy gradually became the ones people chose to follow. Keqin Wang, a journalist well known in China for his constant effort in revealing the dark side of society, obviously took a leading role in the public discussion on "My dad is Li Gang." Before this car accident, Wang had already earned the public's trust in his reports on illegal coal mines in Shanxi, invalid vaccines that led to children's deaths, and many more social incidents that would not have been exposed to the public without him. It was his brave and professional spirit that helped Chinese citizens learn the truth, and sent those corrupt government officials into prison. Soon after the "My dad is Li Gang" incident took place, Keqin Wang organized his own investigating team with his students, and conducted independent interviews of the victims' family and friends, security guards of the university who witnessed the whole thing, as well as journalists who were there in the first place. Keqin Wang published every important clue on *weibo*, and in a week, he compiled a finalized investigation report on this accident and put it online for everyone to download. In the report Wang revealed the fact that the driver was drunk while driving, and did try to escape, and did say the sentence of "My dad is Li

Gang" after being stopped by people, though the whole context of this sentence remained

unclear. While narrating what happened after that night, Wang put much emphasis on

covering how sad the victim's family were, whereas on the other hand there was no way

for him to reach Li Gang. Wang also attached proof of messages that the university sent

to its students to not spread any rumors, so that therefore it became extremely difficult for

the journalists and independent investigators like him to collect enough evidence from

witnesses. All this information spread online rapidly, and became the most "believable"

version. Wang kept updating his *weibo* page with several posts every day to report how

things were moving on, by releasing pictures of the tearful family, diaries of the victim

from before the accident, and interestingly, a series of ordinary people's comments on his

page about their anger towards the unfair justice system. More and more people chose to

follow his way of narrating the story, hence his posts were reposted everywhere online. In

the meantime, though CCTV did an interview with Li Gang and Li Qiming, who was

crying in front of the camera and apologizing to the victims and all Chinese, Chinese

citizens found it too weak or fake to really mean anything. Clearly, Keqin Wang, a brave

man who always chooses to take a different direction from the mainstream media, won a

far greater audience with his report. Already being a social elite, he took advantage of his

professional knowledge and connections to reach people and finally completed a detailed

report as *the* resource for everyone to consume. This brought an even bigger network to

surround him, within which everyone is filled with anger and hoping for justice for all.

He accumulated a huge amount of digital capital by constantly speaking for the victim

and underprivileged; therefore, his name was known to more people, and he managed to

step onto an even higher level of the social hierarchy. Under every single post on this

incident, Wang gets hundreds of comments and reposts, with many applauding for him, and many concerned that he is being ill-treated. During those days, Keqin Wang constructed an image of a journalist bravely residing in the center of the whirlpool of publicity, who led the public to gather round and watch the ugly side of society, and strive for a better one by their collective action of *weiguan*.

The collective *weiguan*, though sometimes silent, was not always passive. The public showed great potential in making this social incident so famous that the dark side could find nowhere to hide. People continuously made *egao*[10] (恶搞) sentences, videos, songs, poems, etc. online. *Mop*, one of the most popular websites in China, initiated an online sentence-making contest, which invited everyone to make sentences that satirize Li Qiming. This contest soon spread to other websites, including *weibo*, on which many social elites actively participated by making funny sentences. Many famous *weibo* accounts, like "Grassroots News" and "Classic *weibo* Archives" all hosted the contest on their own pages to engage their followers. In just a few days, more than 360,000 sentences were created (Online sentence-making contest: More than 360,000 posts satirizing "my dad is Li Gang" incident, 2010, paragraph 1). Some were adapted from famous ancient Chinese poems; some were based on well-known lines in commercials, TV programs, or movies, while others appeared as Kung Fu novels. Meanwhile, a number of videos started to emerge online, among which a so-called "online shenqu" (网络神曲)[11] grabbed the most attention. Shengqinxiangyong, who had been known online for making funny songs and videos, combined his spoof lyrics with the tune from "I am

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[10] "Egao" is usually an action taken to make fun of mainstream serious culture, by deconstructing, remixing, and spoofing a text or several texts.

[11] "Shenqu" originally means "divine tune" in Chinese. As an online language, it refers to a piece of music that is very different from normal ones, but is widely accepted in public.

Xiao Shenyang," a funny song by a famous Chinese burlesque performer, and sang it in a hilarious way. By substituting pictures related to the car accident and relevant reports, this video successfully made audiences see it not only as a funny song, but more importantly, a serious political satire. The professional coverage of this incident by Keqin Wang and other journalists like him, surrounded by all the random *egao* practices of ordinary people, led to the powerful collective actions that fought to destroy the dark side of the society and fight for a fair world. And these collective actions didn't only take place online. Online *weiguan* and *egao* were only able to gain such profound social impact with the help of offline activities. When people started to go onto the street and put signs reading "My dad is Li Gang" out there for everyone to criticize, the whole society reached an exciting moment of making change. With Li Qiming sentenced to jail, Chinese citizens witnessed the power when they mobilized around the network. "My dad is Li Gang," as a popular talk, is now still seen here and there, just for its connotation of political satire. For example, Hebei Transportation Administration has issued traffic warning signs saying "Friend, slow your vehicle, your dad is not Li Gang" (Funny traffic warning signs: Friend, slow your vehicle, your dad is not Li Gang, 2010). Like *geili*, with collective activities both online and offline, "my dad is Li Gang" has turned into a popular casual talk, and more importantly, got acknowledged by official mainstream ideology. This recognition marks the inclusion of citizens' voices into government consideration as a result of collective effort from both elites and ordinary people.

Generally speaking, the majority of online talks won't stay in people's sight for too long. They often fade out when the social incident or event comes to an end or gets forgotten by the public. But the most popular ones are not merely compelling for a

moment. In the following year, "my dad is Li Gang" was repeated several times, among which the Li Tianyi case raised most attention. On September 6, 2011, 15-year-old Li Tianyi and his friend were caught hurling abuse and hitting others, and damaging others' cars. As people were wondering what made this kid dare to drive with no license and treat someone older than him like that, it was soon revealed that he was the son of Li Shuangjiang, a famous singer in China, who also serves in the army with a respectful title. Citizens automatically referred to Li Shuangjiang as another Li Gang, whose offspring have no respect for others or for the justice system in China. With everyone watching, there was no way for Li Shuangjiang to cover for his son this time, and Li Tianyi finally received the legal punishment he deserved. "My dad is Li Gang," starting off as an isolated case, has now become an expression of citizens' criticism of *guan erdai*, and the bureaucracy in China. The Internet has shown great potential for providing information as a resource, and in engaging ordinary Chinese citizens to mobilize around elites. On one hand, it gives elites more opportunities to mobilize people towards his/her agenda and form a public discussion in which elite opinions take the lead. On the other hand, elites, like Li Gang and Li Shuangjiang, need to realize the power of the Internet to engage people against them, and the difficulty in maintaining their elite identity as responsible citizens.

The wide spread of *geili* and "my dad is Li Gang," as well as the inclusion of these popular talks into official recognition, indicates the empowerment of Chinese citizens, especially when they collectively engage with elites. Seeing that both Li Qiming and Li Tianyi ended up with the punishment they deserved, citizens have found online retrieving and sharing very effective in expressing opinions to the public. Like what Yu

(2008) argues, the passiveness of traditional citizenry is gradually replaced by more active media citizenry, which allows Chinese citizens to make themselves visible in public discussion. But instead of media citizenship, I would name it "network citizenship," because it goes beyond the boundary of media, or more specifically, the Internet, and extends into the physical world. The combination of virtual and physical practices of agency makes Chinese citizens available and visible to each other; therefore, we could hear more and more grassroots voices in mainstream discourse. With somewhat greater access guaranteed, the Internet provides a platform for Chinese citizens to network with each other, with social elites, and even with the government. Though censorship in China is an ongoing issue, citizens have been taking advantage of the access they have to seek more visibility in public and therefore more power in political discourse. But of course, this is only one optimistic way to see the whole story. As social hierarchy still exists within the network for ordinary Chinese citizens, we ought to examine who really controls what people think, and how the story unfolds.

Networked citizenship: Internet as regulated resource

When Yu (2008) refers the Internet as a regulation, she mainly focuses on effects of government censorship. Government censorship, combined with severe digital divide in China, does put much pressure on Chinese citizens to pursue free expression and fair access to resources. Digital divide could of course derive from differences in local economy, personal income, gender, education, occupation and so on, but one other important factor to consider, especially when talking about Internet structure in China, is government censorship. In certain moments, people in some places would find themselves with no access to Internet at all. For example, during the time Beijing was

hosting the Olympics in 2008, Xinjiang issues were raised by anti-government powers in order to attract more public attention, especially from international media. To prevent unwanted information from spreading to everyone, the government decided to shut down Internet access in Xinjiang for several months. It is not surprising to people anymore that when certain political concerns occur, government censorship will be used to an extreme end. And this could happen anywhere. People in China still have no access to websites like Twitter and YouTube, unless they know how to *fanqiang*[12] (翻墙). Several social networking sites like *fanfou* have all been permanently shut down due to the enormous power they presented in networking with citizens around sensitive political issues. To some extent, it is the government who gets to decide with whom Chinese citizens could and should be networking.

But the government is not the only power that regulates the Internet in China. What Yu (2008) discusses, the "elitist tendency," is an even bigger resourceful regulation. And this is what this research aims to deal with. The regulation from elites on Chinese citizens often takes place in a more obscure yet influential way. The fact that Chinese citizens usually consider elites as a resource to provide information makes elites' regulation more obscure. But meanwhile, outside of ordinary people's consciousness, elites are directing their visions and opinions in certain directions; therefore, their impact on public opinion is very strong. It is indeed like what Katz and Lazarsfeld (1966) brought forward more than half a century ago, the "two-step flow of communication," which indicates that "… ideas, often, seem to flow *from* radio and print *to* opinion leaders

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[12] "Fanqiang" literally means to "climb over the wall" in Chinese. As a technical and Internet term, it refers to the skill of getting around with the "Great Fire Wall" in China and getting connected with outside servers.

and *from them* to the less active section of population" (p. 32). The only difference is that Katz and Lazarsfeld's findings are based on traditional mass media, while in this research, we are dealing with information flow *from* the Internet, and *on* the Internet. The fluid and fragmented nature of the Internet has of course implicated more alternatives to the two-step flow model, but the essential role that opinion leaders play in mass communication stays unbeatable. In spite of severe digital divides and other Internet access problems, Chinese citizens, especially those who enjoy regular broadband access, tend to see the Internet as a space that provides equal opportunities to them as it does to people with higher social status. If we evaluate citizenship as primarily ownership of property, it is easy to conclude that everyone with equal Internet access possesses equal rights as a citizen. However, as Meehan (1993) argues, "even when the formal barriers are removed, a language of universalism disguises class or group inequalities" (p. 79). On the Internet, it appears that everyone has the same right to speak, to see, and to participate, but this sameness is just a mask over the differences that determine how much attention one's story gets, or what kind of information one would be more likely to retrieve. Ownership of the same property, or access, does not directly lead to ownership of the same level of civil participation in social discourse. In my observation, elites oftentimes take the role of opinion leaders to receive information, process information, and disseminate it to a broader audience. But I will have to state here that I don't equate elites with opinion leaders. Opinion leaders don't have to be socially responsible individuals or groups that show continuous commitment toward collective activities in the society. But elites are expected to actively engage in public discussions and take a leading role. This adds onto the dark side of social capital, which, as discussed by many scholars, can bring as many

negative effects to the society as positive ones. Portes (1995) claims, social capital could potentially bring with it "exclusion of outsiders, excess claims on group members, restrictions on individual freedoms and downward leveling of norms" (p. 15). As discussed above, online popular talks seem to invite everyone into the network, and guarantee much more equal opportunities for citizens to communicate with elites. But a closer look will reveal how social elites take advantage of the networks to quietly pressure ordinary people and regulate the way ordinary people think and speak in public.

As mentioned above, the fundamental problem is that the leadership of elites in online discourse is not usually seen as regulation, but as a resource. Like what we have introduced in previous chapters, most online forums and social networking sites in China today are relying on the enrollment of elites to attract more users. Different from using Twitter, when logging on *weibo*, a user will be automatically surrounded by a list of "top topics," "recommended topic today," "recommended users to follow," and "popular users." These are most likely to be either social celebrities or something related to them. *Weibo* also has a specific page named "celebrity hall," on which there is a comprehensive list of categories such as "entertainment," "fashion," "economics," "government officials," and so on. Under each category, users will find a list of names—oftentimes the VIP users and elites—who have registered on this site. It is true that these marketing strategies are helpful for users to find someone they are interested in to "follow" and supposedly get information they would like to pay attention to. But do Chinese citizens really get to choose whom to listen to and what to believe? Going back to Entman's (1989) idea that "Americans passively 'participate' through leaders' reactions to perceived public opinion" (p. 87), we can see Chinese citizens don't perform much difference when communicating

with elites online. Online talks such as *geili*, even though originally created by the grassroots, would more likely get widely accepted after being frequently applied by elites. Acknowledgement from elites turns on a green light for online talks to enter citizens' daily interactions. Considered to be more fashionable, whether socially or politically, online talks initiated or used by elites work effectively in including Chinese citizens in "deliberate groupthink" (Sunstein, 2006). With more public intellectuals and citizen journalists showing up in public in the name of revealing the hidden dark side of society, Chinese netizens are giving more credit to them for delivering the "real" news. It is never easy to judge which source is more "real" than the other, but on the most popular websites in China, even the ones under severe government censorship, Chinese citizens are inclined to search for alternative voices to those from the government. By posting pictures, videos, or just plain text posts that are from outside (mostly foreign) sources, citizen journalists, public intellectuals, and other professionals are leading public discourse in certain directions they prefer. This was exactly what Keqin Wang, and some of his peer journalists did in covering the story of "My dad is Li Gang." The way Wang told the story catered to Chinese citizens' hidden desire to criticize the corrupted government officials and their children, the *guan erdai*; therefore, Chinese citizens automatically chose to repeat and retell Wang's version of the story, only with more anger. Different voices did come up to speak for Li Gang and his family, but none of them succeeded in catching enough public attention to rescue Li's family from the eye of the storm. On October 21, 2010, a few days after the accident happened, Li Qiming's cousin started to post messages online claiming that the sentence of "My dad is Li Gang" was deliberately misinterpreted by most of the media. According to her, the drunk driver

was only asking for help from one of the security guards there he knew, and he very nervously said, "Please help me, my dad is Li Gang" to introduce who he was. But this claim, which should have had the power to twist the story towards the other end, was soon buried in the online carnival of sentence-making competitions and other *egao* practices. It didn't catch much of elites' attention and therefore didn't get much response from the public either. CCTV's interview on Li and his family had even less, if not worse, impact among the public. One journalist, Jifeng Li, posted a link to this interview and commented that, "All that journalist did in this interview was to ask two questions, hand over some tissue to the crying daddy and son, and helped Li Gang to his feet when he nearly fell. The whole video was about how this father and son were crying and apologizing in front of Chinese people, and they played really hard. The nonstop crying and apologizing just makes this news look weird compared with other normal ones, and it looks like someone has written a script behind the scene." Keqin Wang reposted this *weibo*, and commented, "Good observation!" which was again reposted by nearly 100 people. (Keqin Wang, 2010, October 23) CCTV lost its audience for its failure in detecting the power of the Internet, which presented great potential in marginalizing mainstream ideology that doesn't resonate with Chinese citizens. On the contrary, Keqin Wang won this battle in the public discussion for his good sense of what the public was looking for, and he, as a public intellectual and social elite, brilliantly fought for a way to convey his voice on *weibo*. With the help of *weibo*, Wang built up a huge network around him, so that more digital capital was generated for him to exploit. He gradually wove an information cocoon into which many Chinese citizens were eager to jump and participate.

Together they made the cocoon a big and strong one, and "My dad is Li Gang" has become *the* sentence to criticize the unfair justice system in China.

Though it is easier for celebrities to gain public attention this way, in some cases, these opinion leaders don't have to be someone who already has a big name. On the other hand, as discussed before, not every celebrity has the capacity to mobilize people on the Internet. What's more important here is the ability of frequently gaining access to different resources, and of synthesizing and telling the story in a fashionable way, which automatically qualifies a social and political elite to become an active web elite. Shengqinxiangyong, the author and singer of the spoof song "My Dad is Li Gang," has become a web elite since his song got so popular. Already known as someone good at making fun of social issues by producing remix songs and videos, Shengqinxiangyong's name wouldn't have been credited as an opinion leader without the outstanding impact of the whole "my dad is Li Gang" issue. Everyone who was *weiguan*ing knew about the song. The pictures Shengqinxiangyong chose, the words and phrases that frequently appeared in the song, and the way Shengqinxiangyong arranged the pictures in a certain sequence to match with the lyrics, were all in a way leading audiences towards Shengqinxiangyong's interpretation. Of course we shall not ignore citizens' right and ability to interpret the social incident on their own, but the power web elites have in selecting information and distributing it to Chinese citizens in so intense that they tend to lead public discussions in the way they interpret society. And this is because the selecting and distributing are done in a subtle way, which makes Chinese citizens actively accept the information as a resource, rather than regulation. That's why, from the very beginning, when citizen journalists started to get out onto the street, to talk to witnesses of the car

accident, and then edit the news according to their opinions, Chinese citizens were eager

to credit their news as more "real." Not only do citizens believe in web elites, but also,

and more importantly, they believe what the elites have said is the most significant issue

to consider. Therefore, though it is good to see citizens actively criticizing the distorted

guan erdai culture and judicial system in China, we should ask why much less attention

has been given to the victims of this accident, to the security problems in the universities,

or even to the educational system in China. Moreover, as "my dad is Li Gang" became

extraordinarily popular, this online talk actually turned into a web elite itself. It becomes

powerful in framing and criticizing similar social incidents that happened afterwards. On

September 18, 2011, a 19-year-old boy, Ma Wencong, hurt a girl when quarrelling with a

store manager over a parking conflict. Ma wanted to drive away but was stopped by some

citizens who happened to be around. Ma purposely hit one of them with his car, twice,

which caused severe damage to the victim. It was first reported that Ma was aggressively

shouting, "My dad is the mayor," which automatically reminded people of "my dad is Li

Gang." While everyone was criticizing *guan erdai* again, *human flesh search* found out

that his father was not the mayor, but just a rich businessman. No one would then confirm

for sure that he/she had actually heard Ma saying that he was the son of the mayor.

Witnesses just claimed they heard it from someone else in the crowd ("My dad is mayor"

is rumor: Reported by Wenzhou Police Department, 2011, paragraph 4). "My dad is Li

Gang," ten months after it first grabbed citizens' attention, was still directing public

opinion to a fixed track of criticizing the *guan erdai* phenomenon in China. What matters

is no longer what the story really is, but who is telling the story, and in what way.

Interestingly, more than a year later, a random post by an ordinary girl, Yufei Zhang, set off a great disturbance among the public. The post says, "Li Gang's son's original sentence was, 'please call 120, save the girls first, my dad is Li Gang, I cannot run away from the public'. I am shocked. How about you?" (Is "My dad is Li Gang" a misinterpretation? 2013, January 10). The girl later claimed that she was only reposting someone else's words online. But it was this post that grabbed the public attention, and suddenly many people, including social elites, started to criticize media practitioners for distorting the context and representing the story in the way they wanted. Shi Bugui, a public icon for youth leadership and VIP user of *weibo*, commented on his page that, "if a report on a real social incident is full of false information, this is just to destroy people's faith in news media, to lead the public to an undesired way, and to harm everyone concerned" (Shi Bugui, 2013, January 10). With help of Shi Bugui and many other public figures like him, Chinese citizens collectively accused media practitioners for not being objective when covering the story, and stated that they should not lead public opinion in such an irresponsible way. It was one of the first moments that Chinese citizens started to realize that social elites not only provide resources for them to share, but also present a threat in steering the way ordinary people think and speak. But the anger didn't last long. When another critical social incident took place, people still automatically chose to follow certain news practitioners who appeared to speak for ordinary people about the truth. And people never really knew what the truth ever was. When a sentence, or a picture, suddenly ignites people's collective anger or excitement in a public discussion, they tend to forget about the negative side of news media and social elites, especially the ones they have been following for years.

So while we have to admit that every Chinese citizen is able to participate in social and political issues with the development of technology, we also have to question the inclusion of citizens into public discourse: who is controlling Chinese citizens' subjectivity after all? The above discussion makes it clear that online popular talks and citizens' offline activities are regulated by the government, elites, and other superior powers. Chinese citizens are chosen to be included in public discourse, rather than consciously succeeding in constructing alternative power dynamics by taking control of their own political awareness. Although it is true that Chinese citizens are empowered to take part in public discussions they had no access to before, the way they participate is holding us back from being too optimistic. In a sense, Chinese citizens are networked into online and offline communities by the government and elites. These resourceful communities are at the same time forming a hidden yet severe regulation on Chinese citizens. Citizens in China, while seemingly networking with one another, are being networked into framed ideologies.

Conclusion

By examining online popular talks in China, this chapter has analyzed the Internet as both regulated resource and resourceful regulation for Chinese citizens to get information and participate in public issues. It has long been controversial whether China is seeing a more democratic citizenship with the development of Internet. I argue that the key question to ask is in what ways Chinese citizens are being included and empowered, and what roles elites are playing in fulfilling this inclusion and empowerment. Online popular talks have offered a channel for citizens to convey their opinions bottom-up and sometimes even get the government's attention and show up in mainstream media

coverage. But this resourceful network is to a large extent still in the control of social and political elites. With the online community framed in certain ways that these elite individuals or corporations prefer, Chinese citizens' collective online and offline activities tend to be framed within the information cocoons that elites intentionally weave to engage more people. Empowered Chinese citizens need to be more aware of the hidden role of elites from higher levels of the social hierarchy, hence to play within the power dynamics and hopefully to break through the network built up for them. Without seeing alternative power dynamics constructed by collective agency from the bottom up, Chinese citizens are networked to network with one another. The elitist tendency, though "challenged from both within (intellectuals themselves) and without (by the "ordinary" people), especially with the help of the new media and communication technologies" (Yu, 2008, p. 118), works in the society in a subtle way so that most Chinese still regard elites as a desirable resource to reach and follow. With the huge network around them, the enormous digital capital generated within the network, and the fantasy created for every Chinese who looks for opportunities to get close to the elite circle, social elites are acting as a power of regulation to form a network that every Chinese unconsciously learns to live within. It is the fantasy of freely collaborating with elites, or even transforming into elites overnight, that continuously welcomes more and more people into the network. The fantasy not only boosts citizens' excitement, but also boosts elites' ability in mobilizing around the network, maintaining their own identities, and steering public discussions to the direction of their own interest. Therefore, the interactions between elites and ordinary people are not as promising as people may think. Rather, the Internet has brought more

creative ways for elites to include ordinary people in the network, and to determine the

way Chinese citizens interpret society.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

To summarize this research and respond to the questions I asked in the first chapters, the Internet, especially social networking sites, has created more opportunities for different social groups to interact with each other more freely, to shape and reshape the power dynamics within society collectively. The traditional Chinese value of collectivism helps the Chinese society to guide various social groups towards certain social or political agendas in easier ways. Social elites, once so high up in the social hierarchy, appear to be brought closer to ordinary people, and often play a bridging role between ordinary people and the government when certain social incidents take place or some political concerns raise collective consciousness among Chinese citizens. As we look into each single case of how elites engage with others to construct public discussions, we find elites' identity to be extremely fluid and flexible. It is not a fixed entity isolated beside other social groups in the social continuum, and it does not always play a fixed assigned role in the society. Rather, it exists in the social hierarchy as a fluid continuum that connects with and permeates into higher and lower levels by going beyond others' expectation and extending its ability to mobilize around the huge network around it. To some extent, new media and technology have made it more and more difficult to define who elites are. The unique characteristics of China's economic, political and social background, and its different approaches in information development and regulation, only add more difficulty in defining elites. Therefore, this research starts off by answering the question of what elites have, instead of who they are. Or in other words, in this research, I examine what the qualifications are for someone to be titled as elite, and how elites mobilize around the society with these qualifications.

I find classic social capital theories very helpful in tackling the "what elites have" question. Social capital theorists, with Bourdieu (1986), Putnam (1995, 2000), and Coleman (1988) as leading scholars, have inspired my thoughts on examining social elites as an influential power within a network. I further brought up the term "digital capital" to refer to the digital representation of social capital, which can better fit into the discussion on digital communication. Digital capital is a resource generated by symbolic exchange in the digital network, which can possibly convert into other forms of capital both online and offline. Coleman (1988) argues that the two most important elements that comprise social capital are: "they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors—whether persons or corporate actors—within the structure" (p. 98). My research has investigated how these two elements respectively function in elites' identity construction in contemporary China. With the help of different case studies, the discussion around construction and transformation of elite identities grapples with the social structure aspects of digital capital, while the discussion around mobilization of elite identities puts more emphasis on how collective actions emerge from the digital network.

Lin's (2001) proposal of *accessed social capital model* and *mobilized social capital model* helps me frame my discussion on the construction and transformation of elite identities. With a case study of the online campaign to rescue abducted children in China, I conducted critical discourse analysis on different individuals' *weibo* pages to see how they succeed or fail in attaining and maintaining elite social statuses. By examining public intellectuals, government officials, celebrities, and ordinary people, I argue that the more resources one has access to, and the bigger network one resides in, the more

digital capital one is able to accumulate to attain higher social statuses. According to

Lin's model, higher initial statuses, higher level of education, and stronger extensity of

ties all add to one's capability of achieving network resources, hence attaining elite

statuses. The public intellectual Jianrong Yu, the police officer Shiqu Chen, and the

singer Hong Han all take special care to emphasize their established social position and

education background, to reinforce their initial statuses and extensity of ties.

Consequently, through advocating for those suffered from human trafficking, the three of

them, as representatives from the elite group, further extend their ability in maintaining a

high social status, and influencing society towards positive changes. However, if only

thick trust is generated within the network, and the tie strength between someone and

his/her contacts is too high, even if he/she has got a great number of followers, like

Brother Sharp, and the father who finally found his missing son, Gaofei Peng, it is still

difficult to mobilize around different social identities; therefore, one's ability to attain

and maintain elite status is limited. Therefore, more network resources to use, a wider

radius of trust within the network, and a better ability to mobilize around different

identities and fulfill their social responsibilities are key requirements for someone to

become elite.

To some extent, the Internet does make it easier for someone to accumulate digital

capital and construct elite identity. VIP users on *weibo* can easily get tens of thousands of

comments and reposts for each single post on their pages. Any ordinary *weibo* user also

has the potential to receive a great number of comments and even followers for sharing

an interesting thought or picture online. Shengqinxiangyong, who produced the song to

egao the "my dad is Li Gang" incident, is a good example of ordinary people acquiring

higher social status on *weibo*. But more attention doesn't necessarily bring positive implications for one's life. After the discussion on "my dad is Li Gang" grabbed too much public attention, the driver Li Qiming's cousin spoke online about how Li was only asking for help, instead of arrogantly shouting out who his father was. Though she was very likely telling the truth, many people started to comment on her page and criticize her attitude, while only a small number of people seriously reconsidered what really happened that evening and what we had done or could do to stop telling the story based on our own imagination. The clicks this girl received only brought her negative effects as someone known to the public, and of course she didn't obtain any higher social status out of this story. This is the dark side of digital capital, as from the very beginning, Li Qiming and his family have been positioned on the side opposing the public. Therefore, they are excluded from the social network and public discussion around this car accident and the whole *guanerdai* political discourse. The case of Brother Sharp implicates the dark side of digital capital from the other perspective. If we think about Brother Sharp calmly, the excitement he ignited in public didn't really bring him much benefit either. Though Chinese people collectively created an online legend by discovering this homeless man and helping him get back home, the confusion and fear Brother Sharp faced in this whole incident outweighed the joy of "being helped." Brother Sharp, who initiated an exciting public discussion on social and political issues in China, was very close to opportunities of crossing the boundary and obtaining a higher social status, but wasn't able to accumulate enough trust to mobilize within the big network around him after all. Though it appears that Brother Sharp is in the center of this network, he is indeed just an object of communication, rather than an informed communicator in the

public discourse. The Internet does bring along some unexpected and even undetectable negative social effects, with Brother Sharp as one of the typical examples. The story of *Fengjie*, as mentioned in previous chapters, was another negative case that went to an extreme end: people soon found that the Internet provided a space for those irresponsible people to get access to the public, to spread negative information, and even to become web celebrities. In comparison, Xuriyanggang presents undoubtedly one of the most successful cases of ordinary people crossing the boundary and entering the elite circle. The digital environment provided them a better chance to attract more attention from the public, thus more resources to take advantage of, and a bigger network to reside in. Although their initial statuses and education background were nothing to be proud of, they were able to break through these restrictions and form strong extensity of ties within the network. What is most crucial for their success is that they fulfilled their role, as expected by Chinese citizens, to construct their overarching identities in the society. They perform their multiple identities as underprivileged migrant workers and as web celebrities in different settings to lead public discussions, and have gained enormous trust from every level in the social hierarchy. They know clearly who they are, where they are from, and whom they should speak to and speak for. They have been playing their cards according to the rules that the society has set for them. The socially responsible images Xuriyanggang have constructed in public have increased their ability to mobilize around multiple identities, thus maintaining their elite status. With years passing by, they are still active both online and offline, as the most successful grassroots celebrities who entered the elite circle from the bottom of the social hierarchy. What they represent is not only a

beautiful legend that everybody dreams of, but also the bottom-up power that ordinary people count on to mobilize around in society to make a change.

On the other hand, the Internet has also made it harder for established social elites to maintain their social statuses. Li Gang, and Li Shuangjiang, as discussed in my case studies, are two of the many social elites who completely lost the trust of the public and dropped out of the elite circle. More attention and more followers not only generate more resources to use, but also bring more eyes watching and monitoring you. Bi Fujian, who was one of the most famous hosts of CCTV, is no longer considered a well-accepted social elite after a short video of him criticizing and mocking Chairman Mao in dirty words got released online. Chinese citizens were annoyed by such a respectful public figure speaking in language that showed no respect for others. At the same time, by collectively clicking on the video and spreading the news, Chinese citizens also enjoyed watching Bi Fujian getting dismissed from his position in CCTV, as it was again a moment when citizens felt empowered to collaborate with elites and other social groups for a better society. It is a typical moment in which Chinese citizens to strive for collective pleasure with help of digital capital. To borrow Bankston & Zhou's (2002) words, social capital, as a process (p. 285), is mobilizing within the social structure to sustain both material and symbolic exchanges, and to combine both top-down agenda and bottom-up forces. Besides the nature of connecting like people to generate more bonding digital capital within the network, the Internet has also boosted the network's capability in bridging different social identities and leading to collective action with instrumental purposes. But as discussed in the last chapter, these single cases do not really indicate a more democratic society in China. Social elites, though oftentimes regarded as resources

for ordinary people to retrieve more information, are indeed more of a regulation on Chinese citizens in terms of exerting subtle influence on how they think and speak. This again confirms the dark side of social capital. When social elites choose to include ordinary people into the public discussion, they also choose to exclude those whose ideas go against their agenda. For those who are within the same network, social elites are used to pressuring ordinary people into accepting their beliefs, or to some extent, ordinary people are used to voluntarily participating in the information cocoon created by social elites. Amazingly, Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1966) "two step flow" theory still works in analyzing information dissemination and production in the digital era. Ordinary people only receive the information that have filtered and adapted for them, and willingly produce the information as they are told or guided to. I call it "networked citizenship" in China, as Chinese citizens are not really being empowered to actively network with each other and with other social groups. Rather, they are networked by those from higher social levels, following what these social elites are interested in, and unconsciously repeating what social elites have to say.

By examining how elites construct, transform, and mobilize their social identities with help of digital technology, my study finally reached my initial concern of what kind of changes contemporary Chinese society is witnessing. Different social identities, especially the elite identities, are playing their flexible parts in building up a bigger network with more responsible individuals and groups, who continuously hope, get excited about, and strive for collective action in response to certain social and political issues. During this process, Chinese citizens are embracing more opportunities to get close to the elite group, or even enter the elite circle. However, social elites still enjoy

superior power in leading public discussions in a direction in favor of elites' interests. What we see in China is networked citizenship, rather than a network one. And what China needs is more and more accountable individuals, including elites and others, who take responsibility in mobilizing around their huge network towards a better society.

I hope this study can fit into the popular trend in studying new media and technology in China, especially how digital communication in China is developing with a growing ability to engage multiple social groups and bring possible social and political changes. I try to avoid directly using Western ideology to frame my discussion on China's cases, and start from unique features China presents in its social and political aspects. In focusing on the special social group of elites, I intend to recognize the difficulty in defining elites, yet also try to understand their identity construction and transformation as a fluid process that contributes to any alternative power dynamics in the social structure. After analyzing several cases on *weibo*, I conclude that it is important for someone to have access to a big network and plenty of digital capital to attain a higher social status. And only by effectively mobilizing around different social groups as responsible and engaging individuals can someone transform into a social elite and maintain the elite status. It is of great importance to understand elite identity, as shown in my study, because elites perform a significant role in collaborating with different social identities to form productive public discussions and collective action.

This research is by no means complete, in the sense that there is much more to do in order to understand China's social elites and new media more comprehensively. We can continue discussing this topic in the future by adding more data in different ways. First, it is good for scholars to keep observing and archiving *weibo* topics and posts that

show significant implications for China's digital communication, as well as how we understand its society. This is an ongoing task, as the Internet, is always changing and growing, especially social networking sites, in such a way that any second could become a moment that changes history. Second, it is important to expand this research to other websites, which are newly-emerged, but also present great potential in leading Chinese citizens towards collective action for social changes. For instance, *WeChat*, a newly emerged text and voice messaging service developed by *Tencet*, has shown great capacity to expand features and attract users, not only as a chatting method, but also as a social networking platform. In the years from 2009 to 2014, *weibo* was the one app that most Chinese would spend the longest time on when using his/her mobile device, to follow up with friends or get up-to-date information about almost everything. *Weibo* has been the place for many Chinese citizens to learn about breaking news, like the tragic fire in the CCTV building in 2009, or the bullet train accident in 2011. *Weibo* is regarded as the platform for people to release and receive the most accurate, believable, firsthand news. But in the past couple of years, *WeChat* has become so powerful that people find it more effective and fun to search for and share information. It has some features that *weibo* doesn't provide; therefore, it will be interesting to look at how these new technologies are reshaping people's daily experiences and reconstructing different social identities. Third, interviews and focus groups can help researchers get more empirical data on how people from different social levels perceive elite identities, and their roles in the society. They are extremely helpful for the further completion of this research, as they would offer more direct impressions of social elites from ordinary people, more real daily experiences

of interacting with different groups of people online or offline, and alternative perspectives and views on certain issues.

To conclude, this research looks into elites' identities in digital communication in China. With the help of classic social capital theories, I propose the term "digital capital" to examine how social elites attain and maintain their statuses and construct their identities by accumulating digital capital within the social network. I put special emphasis on boundary-crossing moments when ordinary people succeed in acquiring higher social status or even entering the elite circle. The transformation and mobilization of elite identities indicate great potential of the Internet in China to engage people from different social groups to collaborate for alternative power dynamics within a social structure, and possibly collective action for social change. But in the end, I find that the Internet, as well as social elites in China, serves more as regulations in terms of steering public discussions and forming public opinion, although they are usually regarded as resources for Chinese citizens. I argue that what we see in contemporary digital communication in China is networked citizenship, where Chinese citizens are still being passively included into a huge network, only in the name of empowerment.

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APPENDICES

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A. Background information of China's Internet growth

a. CNNIC reports
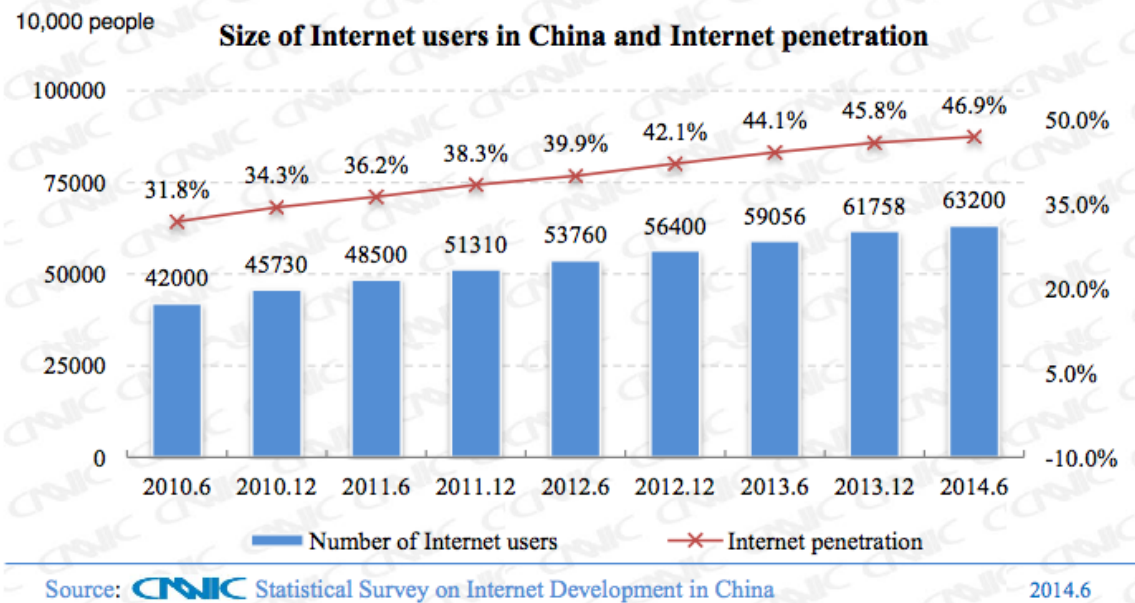
Image 1 Size of Internet users and Internet Penetration Rate in China
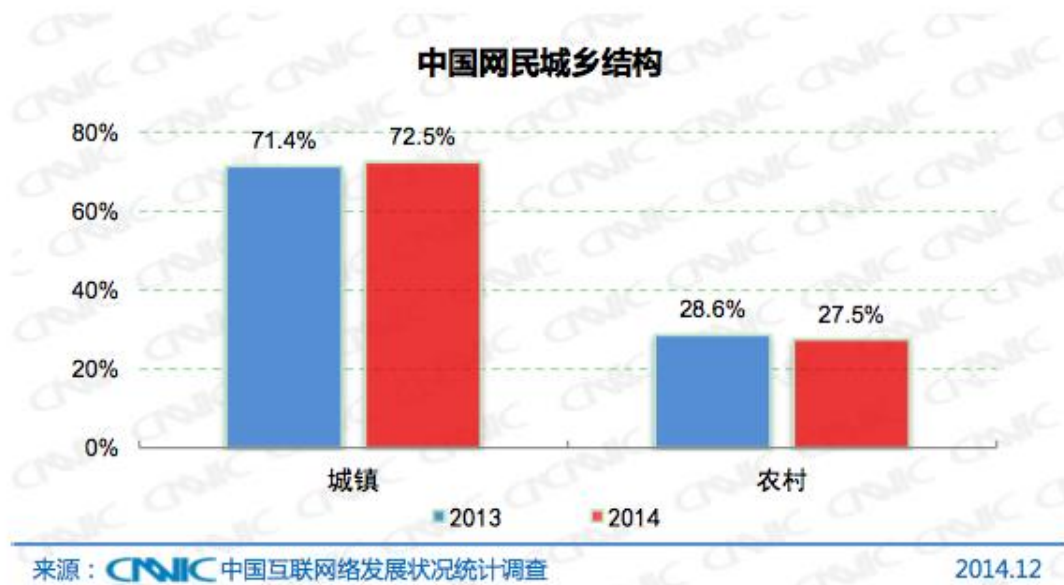
图 17 中国网民城乡结构

Image 3 China's digital divide in urban and rural netizen structure
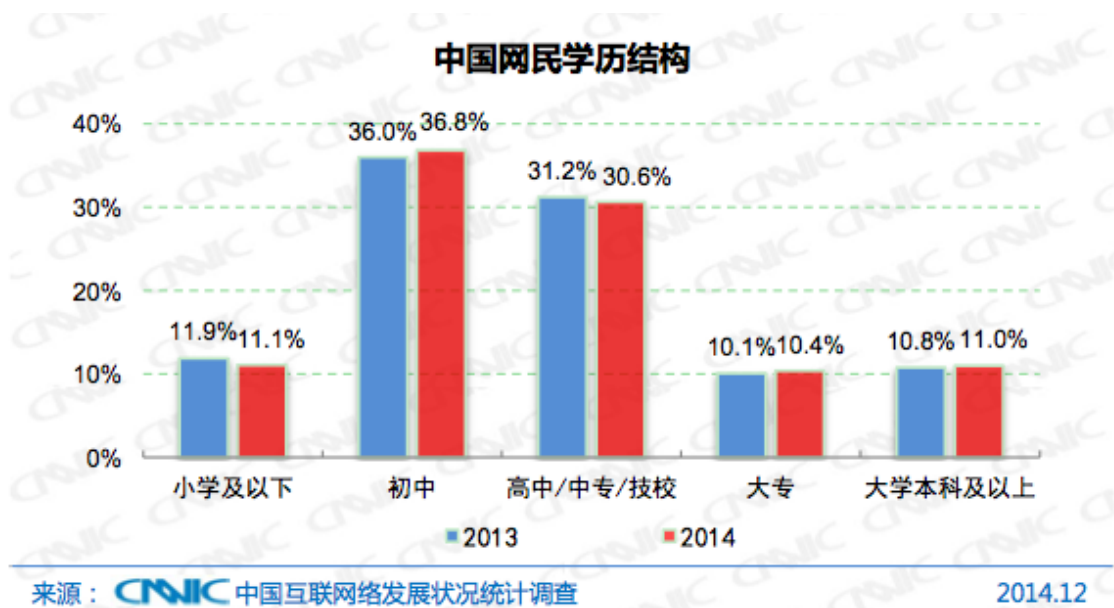
图 21 中国网民学历结构

Image 4 China's digital divide in netizens' education levels
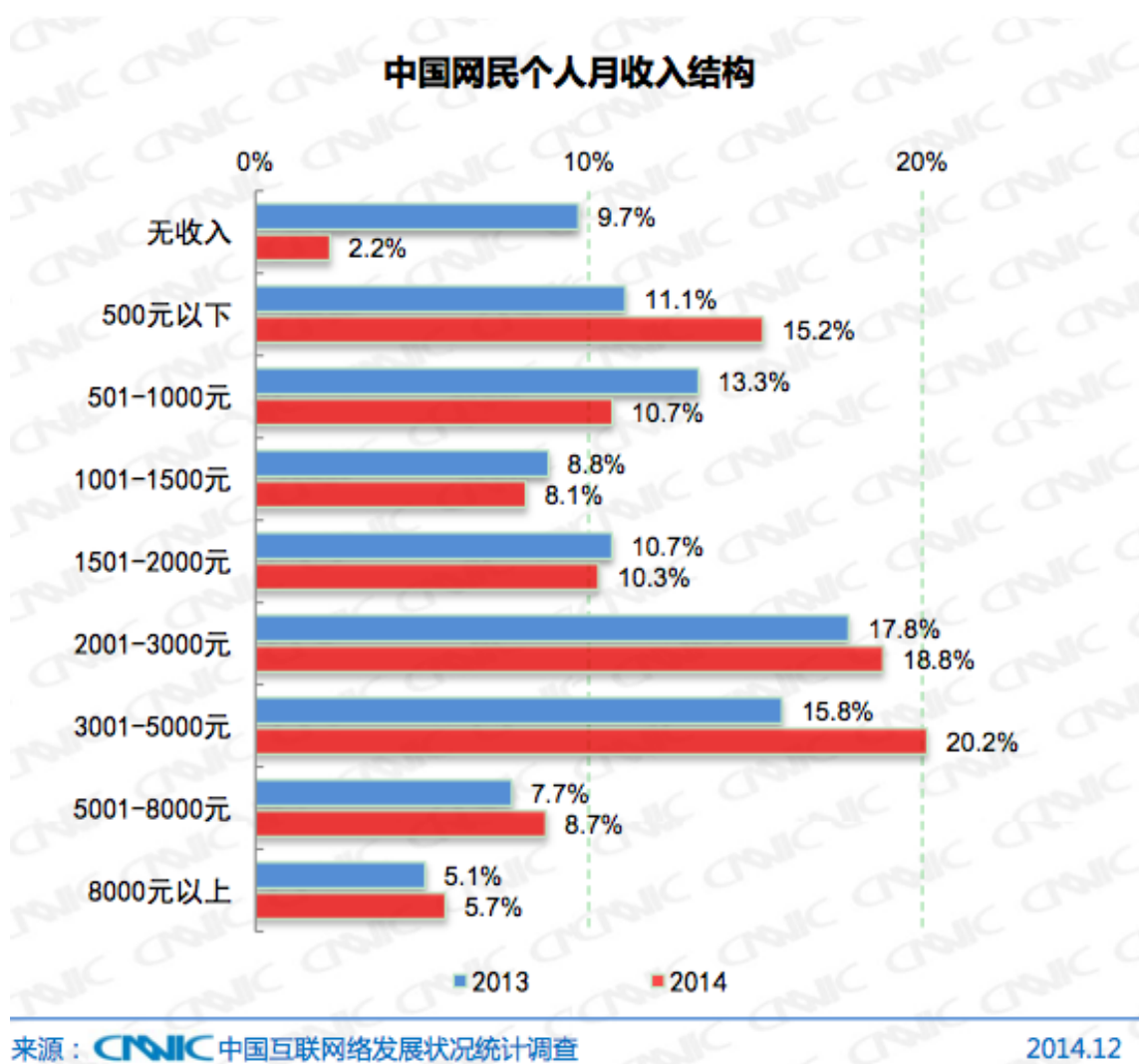
中国网民个人月收入结构

	2013	2014
无收入	9.7%	2.2%
500元以下	11.1%	15.2%
501-1000元	13.3%	10.7%
1001-1500元	8.8%	8.1%
1501-2000元	10.7%	10.3%
2001-3000元	17.8%	18.8%
3001-5000元	15.8%	20.2%
5001-8000元	7.7%	8.7%
8000元以上	5.1%	5.7%

来源：CNNIC 中国互联网络发展状况统计调查　　　　2014.12

图 23　中国网民个人月收入结构

Image 5 China's digital divide in netizens' income levels

非网民不使用互联网的原因

图 13 非网民不使用互联网的原因

Image 6 Reasons that prevent Chinese from using the Internet

b. Other data

Figure 2.3 : Distribution of major ICTs by income group of economies
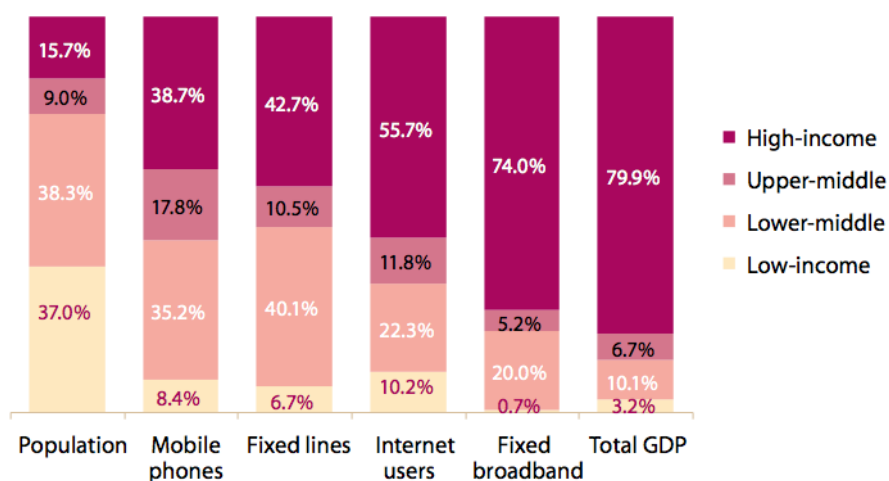
Note: Population data and ICT data are for year-end 2005, GDP data relate to year-end 2004.

Source: ITU World Telecommunication Indicators Database.

Image 2 Distribution of major ICTs by income group of economies

Date	No. of computers with access to the Internet	Internet subscribers	Domain names registered under .CN	WWW websites	International bandwidth (Mbps)	Broadband internet users (million)	Mobile net citizens (million)	Internet penetration rate
Nov. 1997	299,000	620,000	4,066	1,500	25.48			
Dec. 1998	747,000	2,100,000	18,396	5,300	143.256			
Dec. 1999	3,500,000	8,900,000	48,695	15,153	351			
Dec. 2000	8,920,000	22,500,000	122,099	265,405	2,799			
Dec.	12,540,000	33,700,000	127,319	277,100	7,597.5			

2001								
Dec. 2002	20,830,000	59,100,000	179,000	371,000	9,380			
Dec. 2003	30,890,000	79,500,000	340,040	595,550	27,216			
Dec. 2004	41,600,000	94,000,000	432,077	668,900	74,429			
Dec. 2005	45,900,000	111,000,000	1,096,924	694,200	136,106			
Dec. 2006	59,400,000	137,000,000	4,109,020	843,000	256,696			
Dec. 2007		210,000,000	11,931,277	1,503,800	368,927	163		
Dec. 2008		298,000,000	16,826,198	2,878,000	640,286.67	270		22.6%
Dec. 2009		384,000,000		3,230,000		346	233	28.9%
Dec. 2010		457,000,000	4,350,000	1,910,000	1,098,957	450	303	34.3%
Dec. 2011		513,000,000	3,530,000	2,300,000	1,389,529		356	38.3%
Dec. 2012		564,000,000	7,510,000	2,680,000			420	42.1%
Dec. 2013		618,000,000	10,830,000	3,200,000			500	45.8%
Dec. 2014		649,000,000			4,118,663		557	47.9%

Table 1China's Internet Growth 1997-2014

微博月活跃用户增长（单位：万）

14380 15650 16700 17600 19800 21200 22200 23600

2014Q1 2014Q2 2014Q3 2014Q4 2015Q1 2015Q2 2015Q3 2015Q4

Image 7 Increase of active *weibo* users month by month

B. Theoretical framework for case studies
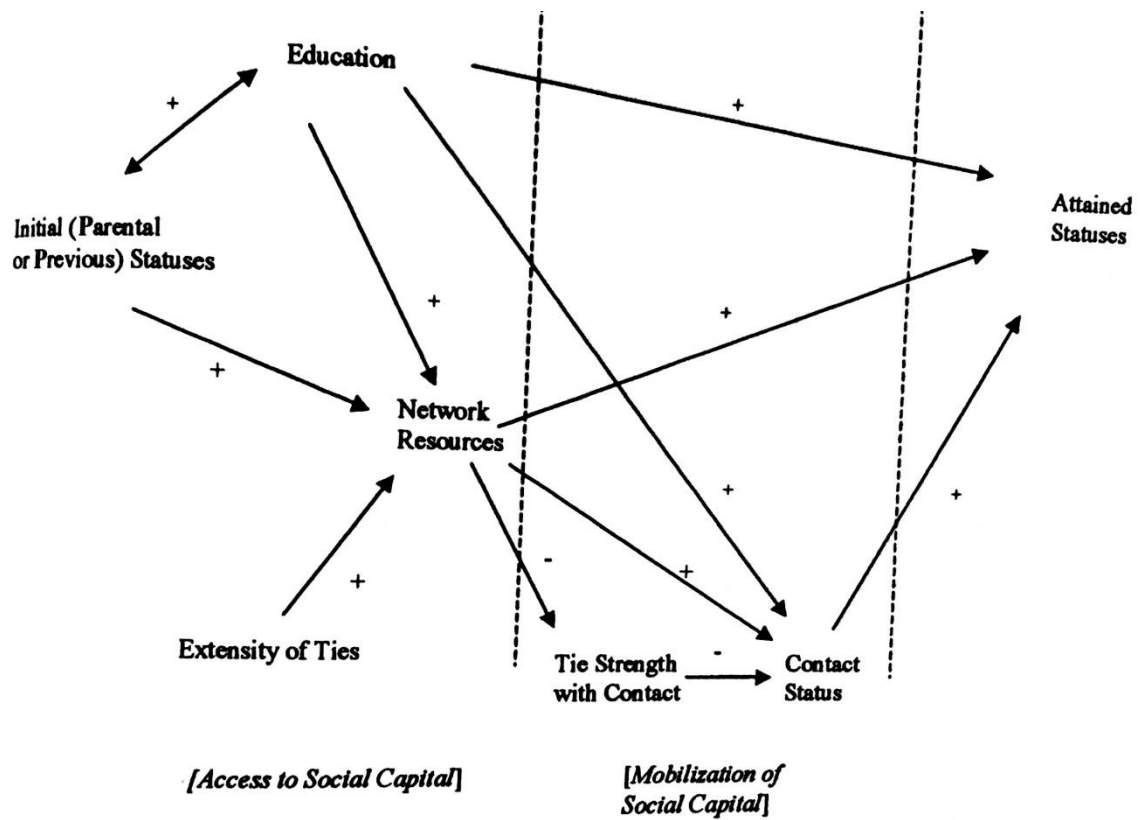
Figure 6.1 The social capital model of status attainment.

Image 8 Lin's (2001) social capital model of status attainment (p. 83)

C. Supporting data for case studies

随手拍 **随手拍照解救乞讨儿童** V

2011-1-31 21:41 来自 微博 weibo.com

谢谢许德全V，请@新民晚报社区版 @新民晚报评论 @陈保平 @新民周刊 @新闻晨报 @萧冰20100802 @上海芮斌 @上海热线市民频道 @lamesaint 给予关注，谢谢。

@许德全v

@随手拍照解救乞讨儿童，上海地铁9号线，还有一能够行走的儿童分头在乞讨。

2011-1-31 21:02 来自 微博 weibo.com   39 | 4 | 赞
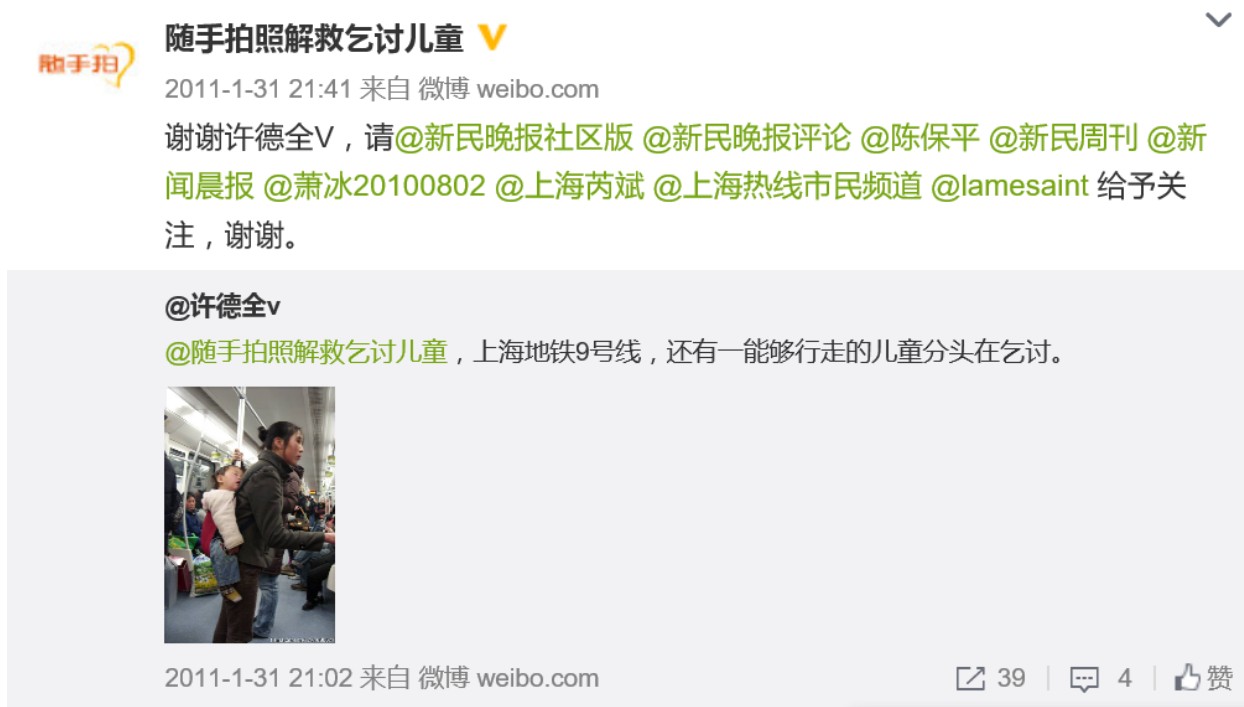
Image 9 One post from the online campaign of "Raise Your Hand, Rescue a Child"

Image 10 Yu's *weibo* page with profile picture
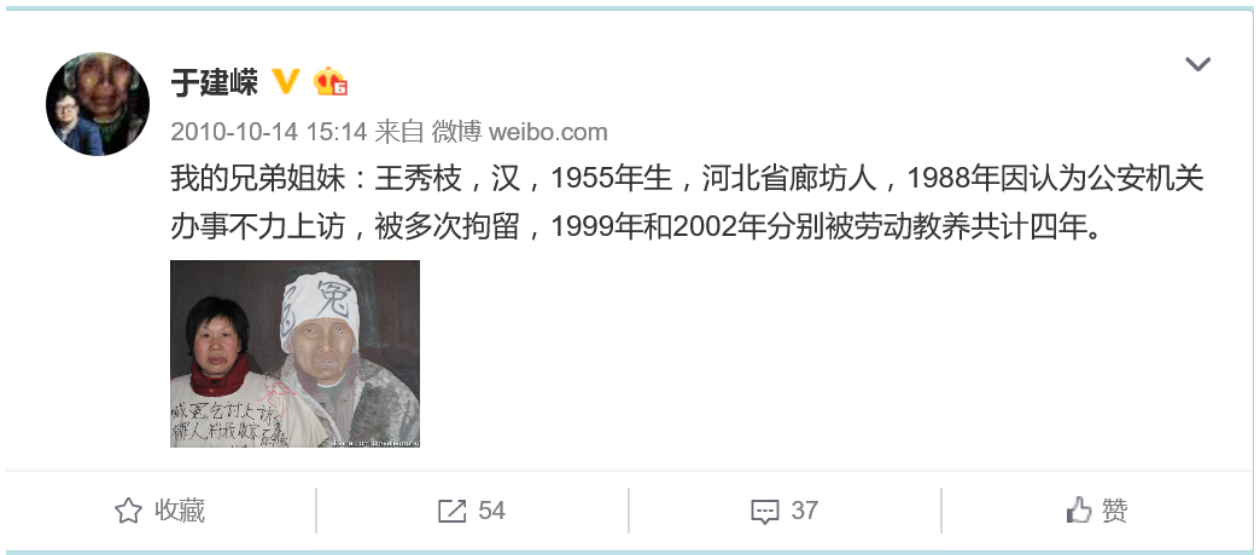
Image 11 Yu's post with whole picture of the woman in profile picture

Image 12 Chen's *weibo* page with profile information and a typical post

Image 13 Chen's weibo page with profile picture
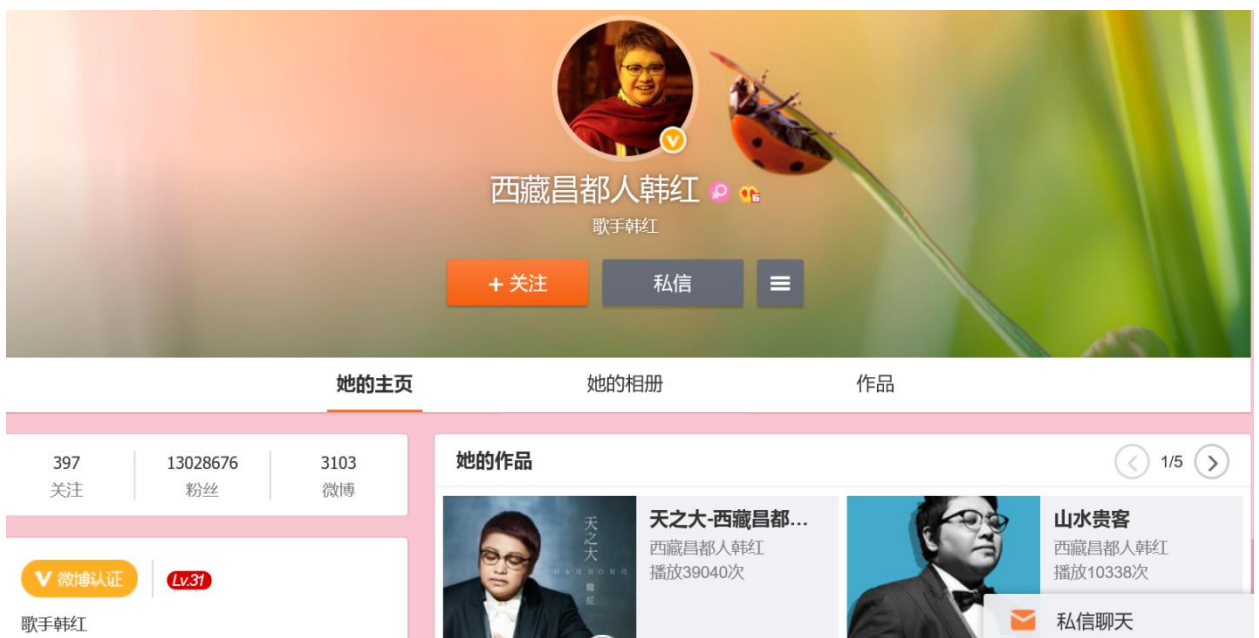
Image 14 Han's *weibo* page with profile picture

Image 15 *Weiboinfluenceindex* for Han

Image 16 Pop-up window to send Han flowers on *weibo*

Image 17 Picture of Brother Sharp

Image 18 Picture of Brother Sharp and a runway model

Image 19 Xuriyanggang featured in Chinese Spring Festival Gala of 2011
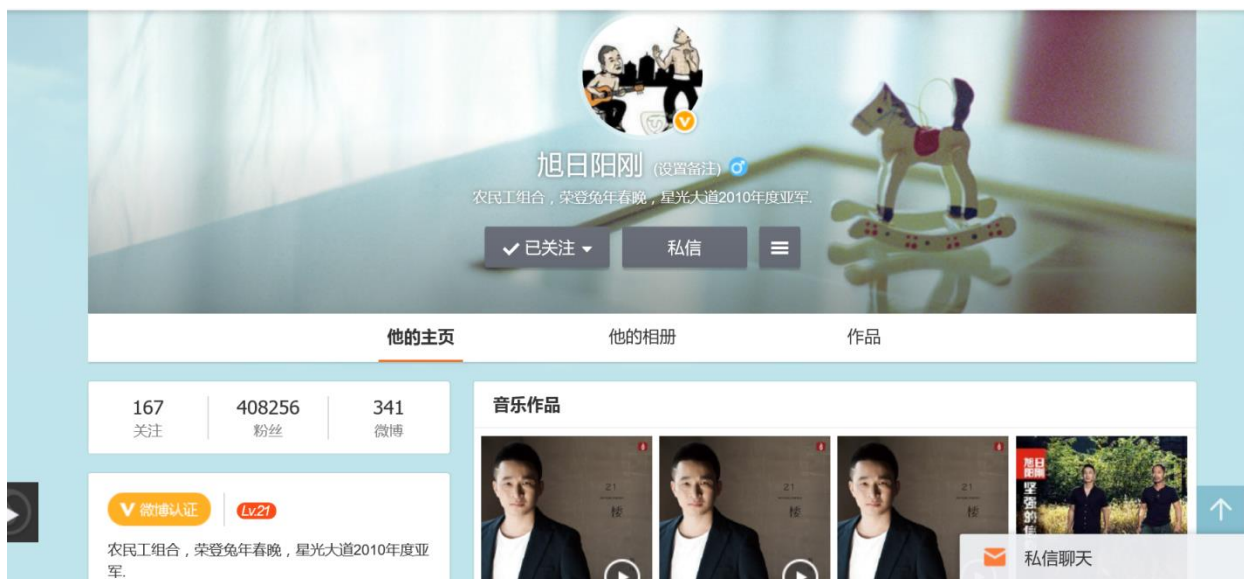
Image 20 Xuriyanggang's *weibo* page with profile picture
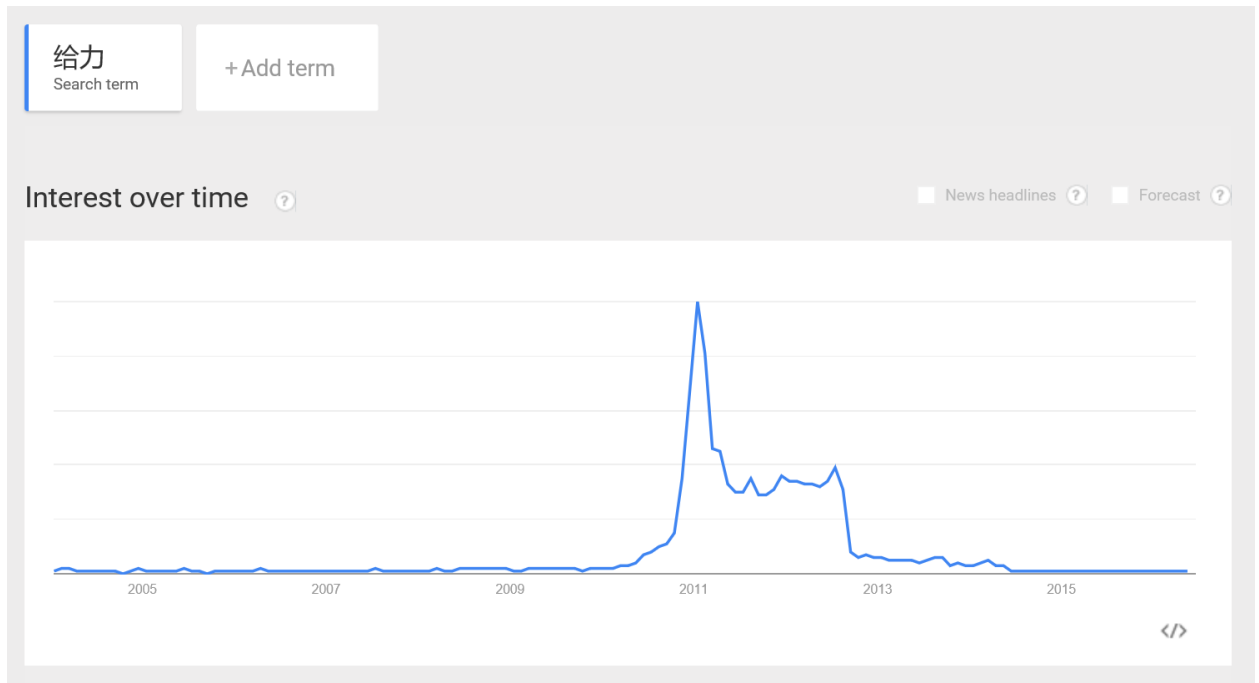
Image 21 Interest in *geili* over time

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