

**Everyday Civic Practices in Online Assemblages:
Social Media, Civic Virtue, and Collective Participation in China**

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Abstract

The development of social media has triggered a lot of research and debates about its role in social changes all over the world. Among researchers, special concern is given to the political changes that are seen together with diffusion of social media uses. This research follows this line with a new touch: It explores the interactions between the social and the civic which underpin everyday civic practices, argued as grassroots democratic participation, on China's social media through the lens of online assemblage, a construct using Actor Network Theory to refer to collective efforts of people and content they generate on various social media technological affordances. By using online non-participant observation and repeated informal online interviews, this research finds prevalence and multiplicity of online assemblage participation cross platforms, spanning interests and roles, and covering various social relations. Using media as practice theory and the concept of civic virtue to examine the findings, this project explores the civic significance of such prevalence and multiplicity along the social-civic spectrum from the broadened blurring of the social and the civic to the civic end. I argue that daily participation in online assemblages integrates social interactions with civic acts, remixes the common-sensed public and private spheres, generates social-entangled and technology-assisted civic virtue practices, and requires reconsiderations of how, when, where and why civic participation is practiced in social media age. I argue that most online assemblage participation is the cultivation and practices of civic virtue, which I argue is the link between individual social media users and online collective efforts. I argue that by practicing civic virtues in multiple online assemblages, social media users practice citizenship in an informal way. I argue the massive and dynamic practices of citizenship in numerous online assemblages whose visibility is occasionally seen in Internet events, or high online sentiment which cause government's attention and actions, are grassroots democratic participation in authoritarian China.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Positioning this research in the background of civic and political changes arguably brought by social media worldwide and in China in particular, this chapter lays a solid foundation for the coming academic journey by outlining the most important basics: research questions; definition of key terms including social media, online assemblages and civic virtue; and the political economy of social media in China, to offer a background in which this research was conducted, data collected and interpreted, and findings theorized. As a country with the largest number of Internet and social media users, the examination of online civic practices in China is significant for understanding civic practices in social media age.

1.2 Background and Significance

Social media have been arguably associated with social transformations, or macro-level social changes, all over the world. Social media research addresses macro changes as radical as toppling down of governments, as seen in Arab Spring (Nanabhay and Farmanfarmaian, 2011; Rane and Salem, 2012; Oh et al, 2015; Miladi, 2016;); as mass and large-scale as social movements spreading across Western and Eastern developed countries and regions (Thorson, et al 2013; Panagiotopoulos et al, 2014); as prospective to contest authoritarian rule as seen in studies on social media in China (e.g. Zhang and Zheng eds, 2009; deLisle et al, eds, 2016); and as profound as the argued emergence of online civil society (Yang, 2009) and public sphere (Tierney, 2013). The agents of social change are usually organizations (Nah and Saxton, 2012; Bayraktutan et al, 2014), mass collective of individuals like social movements (Milan, 2013; Mercea and Iannelli, 2016) or both (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Pătrut and Pătrut, eds 2014).

Parallel to the efforts to theorize social changes from macro level, Chambers (2013) and Baym (2015) research social media at micro level and argue for changes such as inter-personal friendships and intimacy. There is an obvious gap here: macro-level social changes are examined from political and civic perspectives whereas micro social changes are looked from a

social perspective. Can political and civic changes be examined from micro level? How are such changes achieved via “social” media? What micro changes are related to macro societal changes? How are more minute changes channelled to macro ones? And how do channelling processes relate to power changes in different societies? I ask these questions in the face of gaps between existing literature on the relationship between micro and macro changes as well as the relationship between the social and the civic. I intend to examine micro-level civic practices on social media in China.

A similar attempt to look at micro-level civic practices on social media is made by Skoric et al (2016) who pre-assume social media users’ role/identity as citizens and then focus on behaviours that fulfil this role/identity. The pre-assumption of citizenship is widely seen in macro studies on social media and social change. Social media are argued as tools, means, or spaces for citizens to fulfil citizenship, hence, civic and political participation. This pre-assumption separates the civic uses of social media from social uses and looks at the civic uses of social media as a distinctive field of uses.

The separation of the civic and social uses of social media is challenged by a wave of research on the collapse or blurring of the division between the public and private owing to the embeddedness of social media in daily routines (Papacharissi, 2010; Hinton and Hjorth 2013; Highfield, 2016). The civic and the political are set in the everyday uses of social media and are an entangled part of social uses. Moreover, the civic-social separation is further complicated by the argument that active social uses of social media are positively associated with political expressions on social media (Yu, 2016). How do the social and the civic uses of social media interact with each other in everyday life? What does this interaction mean for the practice of citizenship and for democracy as well, since all the above literature centre around one theme, implicitly or explicitly: social media and democracy? In what social networks do the social and the civic uses of social media interact? A more nuanced look at the interaction of the civic and the social is needed to answer those questions. My research takes on such a nuanced perspective by applying civic virtue and social capital concepts and I unpack the above questions in the analytical and concluding chapters.

The practice of citizenship and democracy on social media is particularly significant in China, where freedom of speech, information dissemination, association, collective actions and political expressions are written in the law

but in reality restricted, surveilled, censored and controlled by the party-government; and citizen education, whose prior principle is to adhere to Chinese Communist Party's monopoly reign over China, is done top-down at school, workplace, and via party-government-controlled mass media. Instead, bottom-up, voluntary, initiative, that is, grassroots uses of some social media platforms are conceptualized as grassroots participation in online collective actions and public discussions are argued as the forming of online civic society (Yang, 2003a; 2003b; 2014; Zhang and Zheng eds., 2009; Mou, et al. 2013; deLisle et al. eds, 2016; Xie et al, 2017) and public sphere (Mou, et al., 2013; Jiang, 2014; Rauchfleisch and Schäfer, 2015; Su, 2016; Dong et al, 2017; Shao and Wang, 2017; Ye et al, 2017; Chen et al, 2018) in China, both theories looking at bottom-up civic and political participation. Such research takes the online civil society and public sphere as grassroots democracy and a force in society-state contention. Grassroots democracy in this sense seems to mean that citizens voice their concerns and opinions in public affairs in online open space collectively, or collective discursive expressions on public issues. Yet, such research is usually media-centred, mostly centring on microblogging or Weibo; issue-centred on news and public affairs content generated by some social media users; and public-centred on assuming social media users as citizens forming public sphere and/or online civil society on allegedly public social media platforms. I intend to look beyond these limitations and look at people in various online assembling settings without the above pre-assumptions. Instead, my approach to such examination is individual users and their individual practices in their everyday life. The highlight of individual users, I argue, fills a gap of the above-mentioned civil society and public sphere literature: such literature looks at collective practices only. In another word, these literature look at iceberg above water. How do individuals' uses of social media generate collective practices and how is citizenship practiced in such process? These questions about "iceberg below the water" remain unanswered in current literature. I explore them from chapter 6 by using amateur online activism and Internet event concepts in addition to civic virtue and social capital concepts and summarize my explorations in the conclusion chapter. In his investigation of the theory of civil society, Seligman argues that the idea of civil society is an "assumed synthesis of private and public "good" and of individual and social desiderata" (1992: x). I use online assemblage to unpack the synthesis of the private and public, of the individual and collective, and of the social and the civic. I examine bottom-up civic and political participation in the face of large amount of

social media platforms and apps as well as huge numbers of social media users in China. I want to see if and how ordinary social media users in China form the argued online civil society and public sphere; how ordinary social media users practice citizenship, on which the arguments of online civil society and public sphere are based; and what kind of citizenship is being practiced. These questions remain untouched in current scholarship and I will address them mostly in the Conclusion chapter.

Also getting less academic attention is the research on the civic effect of living constantly in collectives on social media. Facebook claims that it hosts tens of millions of Facebook groups (Doshi and Schneidman, 2018). Though there are no statistics on similar groups on China's social media, the numbers should be similarly high. With the prevalence of social media in China, many social media platforms provide online grouping functions and using these functions becomes a daily routine for most Chinese.

Participation in online communities or online collective activities such as video games is theorized as means of associational life (Schulzke, 2011; Zhang, 2014; Paxton and Rap, 2016). Yet, no scholarship has paid attention to the effect of associational life on individuals' practice of citizenship. I return to this issue in the Conclusion chapter. Wang and Shi (2018) argue that joining issue-based groups in China's Weibo enhance participants' civic virtue, though this is only taken for granted without unpacking which civic virtues are enhanced and how. Living in various online collectives in social media age deserves more academic attention.

To contribute to answering the above questions and gaps, this research explores mundane and prevalent social media uses in China: participating in social media assemblages. Besides, many Chinese use more than one online assemblage in more than one social media platform. This research attempts to examine the practices of participating in multiple online assemblages on social media and the significance of such practices on civic practices in China. Owing to the huge number of social media users, among 900 million Chinese who use mobile phone to access Internet (CNNIC, 2020), their potential civic practices and civic virtues from social media assemblage practices are significant for grassroots democracy in China. Moreover, in the face of tighter censorship and control on China's online expression, it is more difficult for the regime to suppress civic virtues than to suppress collective actions and expressions. I argue civic virtues are seeds of civil society, democracy, and public sphere. Therefore, the examination of civic virtues in China is significant.

1.3 Research Questions and Definitions of Terms

Based on the research context presented above, this thesis aims to answer this main research question: Does participation in multiple online assemblages cultivate civic virtues in China and how? I look at ordinary social media users' daily uses of social media assemblages to answer this question. Ordinary social media users distinguish from non-governmental organizations (NGO) which use social media as advocacy and mobilization tools and sites and are argued as an important force of China's online civil society (Shi, 2013; Zhou and Pan, 2016; Zhang and Skoric, 2020). In contrast to professional staff working in such organizations, ordinary people are found to use social media for multiple purposes: expressive, informational, relational, identity-oriented and entertainment-oriented (Skoric et al, 2016). Based on this knowledge and with media as practice theory as theoretical framework (Couldry, 2004), the following subsidiary questions are raised:

- a) Which online assemblages do social media users participate in? This question looks at where, when, and with whom online assemblages form. It emphasizes the multiple online assemblages that social media users participate in, the range of such multiplicity, and the function of such multiplicity in social media users' social and civic life. I address this question centrally in chapter 5. It then pulls out the following question:
- b) What do social media users do in online assemblages? This question examines interactions and other activities that social media users do in online assemblages; content that such interactions and activities create; social, assemblage, and personal circumstances of such creations. Special concerns are given to patterns of interactions or other activities in online assemblages that emerge as habits that maintain recurrent participation and to diversity or monotony of habits in different online assemblages. This question is addressed throughout the analytical chapters.
- c) What do social media users say about what they do in online assemblages? This question correlates with the findings from the second question which are heavily based on "content" produced in online assemblages. By asking social media users why they do what they do, this research avoids empirical findings that are solely based on content. This question enriches as well as balances findings by looking at intention, motivation, awareness, consciousness, initiatives and other agency, habit,

and disposition-related subjective elements in social media assemblage participation and activities.

d) If and how do civic virtues emerge from social interactions and how do the social and the civic intertwine in online assemblage activities? This question combines findings from previous three questions and sees the interactions between the social and the civic in online assemblage participation. It focuses on how practices of social media users form or reflect civic virtues.

Questions b, c and d are addressed through the work from Chapter 6 to Chapter 9. By asking these questions, my research intends to find out if social media as practice relate to civic practices in China: if social media users practice civic virtues and citizenship by daily interacting with each other in various online assemblages. To achieve this understanding, I define key terms as the following:

a) Social Media

There are many definitions of social media, in terms of user, content format and function (El Ouiridi et al: 2014; McCay-Peet and Quan-Hasse, 2017). Meanwhile, there are also many authors using the term without giving any definitions (Loader and Mercea, 2012; Trottier, 2012; Chambers, 2013; Hinton and Hjorth, 2013; Tierney, 2013; Pătrut and Pătrut, 2014; Evans, 2015). Social media is such a contested concept that the conceptualizing efforts are often trapped in its technological attributes, Web 2.0 being the encompassing term for such attributes, such as connectivity (Dijck, 2012; 2013; Chambers, 2013); interactivity (Loader and Mercea, 2012); sharing (Trottier, 2012; Tierney, 2013; boyd, 2014; Evans, 2015; Highfield, 2016); user-generated content (Loader and Mercea, 2012; Hinton and Hjorth 2013); blurring of producer and user or produser (Hinton and Hjorth, 2013); participation (Hinton and Hjorth 2013); and networking (Loader and Mercea, 2012; Hinton and Hjorth 2013; Milan, 2013; boyd, 2014; Highfield, 2016). Moreover, the variety of Web 2.0 technologies complicates the defining attempts. A definition based on technology states that social media refers to "sites and services that emerged during the early 2000s, including social network sites, video sharing sites, blogging and microblogging platforms, and related tools that allow participants to create and share their own content" (boyd, 2014: 6). Solan and Quan-Haase summarize that social media are characterized as supporting user-generated content; providing means of connection between users; and supporting means of engagement between users (Hjorth et al, eds. 2017). This conceptualization covers the key features of social media technologies.

Conceptualizations of social media based on technological features and affordances contrast with the social construction of technology and social shaping of technology. The latter two either stress the importance of people or emphasize "a middle ground" between people's agency in creating and applying technology as well as circumstances in such creation and application and technological affordances per se (Baym, 2015: 51). These two perspectives look at technology as artefacts of human creations. The debates between technological determinism and social construction or shaping of technology are wrestles for causality in terms of contributions to social change. The causality debate disappears in the perspective of Actor Network Theory (ANT), which views the world as collectives of people and their artifacts, or human and inhuman, and both are equal in the same network they together weave and are equally affected (Callon, ed. 1998; Latour, 1999; 2005; Law, 1999; Law and Hassard, eds. 1999). ANT takes both human and non-human as actors. The non-human is conceptualized as a condition for the possibility of human society; as mediators; as members of moral and political associations; and as gatherings (Sayes, 2013). ANT helps me avoid conceptualizing social media as automatically connecting or participating technologies but put such technological affordances into scrutiny of uses.

Following ANT, I define social media as online devices and services targeting at facilitating the conduct of mediated relations via content as data between people by multiple means. This definition is rather simple because I agree with the claim that "Ethnography does not assume what is social media, but rather highlight its social uses according to context" (Madianou, 2015: 2). With the initial conceptualization of social media, I will define what social media is from people's practices with social media as well.

b) Online Assemblage

ANT not only looks at humans and their artefacts as equally important actors in a social phenomenon, it also emphasizes the assembling of these actors as well as connections or associations between actors (e.g. Latour, 1999; 2005; Law, 1999; Law and Hassard, 1999). Assemblage, then, is the outcome of the process of assembling and reassembling (Alcadipani and

Hassard, 2010). ANT and assemblage in particular offer a dynamic instead of static look at actors contributing to a social phenomenon, highlighting movements and potentials of re-organization of actors, unstableness and fluidity of social phenomenon as well as links between social phenomena via reassembling of actors. These arguments of ANT resonate with my findings to be summarized in Chapter 5. Therefore, online assemblage is coined to refer to various online collectives of people, the aggregation of content they create or traces they leave, conditions that enable content, flow of content as data, etc. It refers to Internet phenomena or social media applications, like new forms of organizing (Wang et al, 2013), collective social formations (Swart et al, 2019), and organizing and congregating in virtual space (Woolley et al, 2010), owing to the technological affordances of the Internet and social media. It implies the indispensability of human actors, individual social media users, and inhuman actors listed above. It includes “groups” that some social media platform term their services, like Facebook groups, WhatsApp groups, WeChat¹ chat groups, etc. It also covers social networks and communities used by some researchers looking at collective content generation, sharing, and discussion in social media platform groups (Black et al, 2011; Gregory, 2015; Swart et al, 2019).

In this research, online assemblage is a construct to describe the online grouping of people and content via using various social media technologies and services, and the collectivity that such grouping generates. This construct covers online “group” as a service provided by many social media platforms as well as the aggregate of people via content and trace that they generate in other forms of service including following, commenting, networking, etc. Online assemblage in this research is used as an ontological tool to look at the aggregation of people and content on social media, features of such aggregation, and if and how civic practices are conducted in such aggregation.

Online assemblage contrasts with three constructs. The first is the more popular yet controversial term “online community.” Rheingold, the first author

¹ Top social media platform with largest number of users in China.

on virtual community, the forefather of online community, defines online community as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussion long enough, with sufficient human feeling” (1993: 5). The “feeling of community” aspect of this definition and its heavy-laden associations like intimacy, shared history, sense of community (Malinen, 2015: 229) are inherited in following conceptualizations of the term and theoretical and empirical research using the term. And it is also the most controversial element.

In contrast, the term online assemblage is free from such aspect. It is flexible enough to include online community as conceptualized in the above definition and its opposite: smaller numbers of people, non-public talk, various time span, and insufficient human feeling involved. It is neutral and formal. Furthermore, the term online assemblage captures applications of both past and more recent social media technologies: naturally growing forums; clusters of people out of following; cluster of content and trace owing to commenting, liking and reposting; setting up and joining online collectives of various sizes, etc. Lastly, some social media platforms in China claim themselves or are termed by common sense uses as online communities, that is, a platform is self-claimed or considered as a community. Online assemblage is useful to distinguish from such use of online community. Therefore, the concept online assemblage is descriptively-empirically flexible and neutral, and normatively neutral as well in contrast to the more positive normative concept of online community.

The second contrasting concept is online networks. This concept emphasizes user’s initiatives in using networking technologies afforded by social media platforms. Yet, it does not cover social media technology-initiated aggregating of content and traces generated by users. Online assemblage, on the other hand, covers both initiatives.

The third contrasting concept is online groups. As mentioned earlier, some social media platforms claim group as a service and online group refers to such claimed service. In my interviews, respondents use the term “online group” when describe their uses of such service. Online assemblage includes online groups as well as other social media services that aggregates people and content they generate. However, for the authenticity of empirical data, I will use online group when setting out empirical data more descriptively and use online assemblage when reflecting/outlining more on my interpretations/theorizing. This would help highlight what the concept and ANT adds to everyday understandings of online groups.

Borrowing ANT which conceptualizes human and their artefacts as equal actors co-working into forms of networks, online assemblages in this research refer to various non dyadic communications among social media users out of a variety of social media technologies. They include network in some uses (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Baym, 2015); virtual community and online community; community, user group, chat groups, friend circles and many other names that are seen in different social media platforms.

c) Civic Virtue

When arguing the inseparable relation between digital platforms, as the latest development of internet technologies, and societal structures as the platform society, Dijk et al express doubt over the logic that connectivity enabled by the technological affordances of social media technology automatically leads to collectivity, or connectedness (2018: 2). This echoes my aforementioned conceptualization of social media with ANT perspective which avoids causal effect of technological affordances. In my project, on the one hand, I wrap up collectivity in the operational concept of online assemblage, as seen in Chapter 5. On the other hand, I use the concept of civic virtue to unpack such collectivity in Chapter 6 and 7.

The relevancy of civic virtue to collectivity is believed to be part of Western political philosophy which has always acknowledged the relevance of individual factors, including character, in shaping collective life (Frega, 2019: 186). The idea of civic virtue is believed to originate from ancient Greek and Roman philosophers and political theorists. Going through almost 3000 years of Western political philosophy and theory, the concept is loaded with a long trail of conceptualizations and interpretations, each according to specific epoch and the particular ideology of its proponents and opponents. Civic virtue, then, is an epochal and contextual concept, changing as time goes by with changes of social conditions. The singular form of the term, civic virtue, is a kind of political philosophical notion (Hess, 2016: 927), an ideal of "human excellences that contribute to the flourishing of individuals and to the political community" (Costa, 2009: 403). So I take civic virtue, firstly, as an ideal and meanwhile a time and space-specific concept, that is, what are argued as civic virtues is time and society-specific; and secondly, as a theorized link between individuals and collectives and I use such link to conceptualize the channelling of the social and the civic in online assemblages on social media. Meanwhile, I take the individual and the common as two components of the concept of civic virtue and examine how the individual and the common are linked in online assemblages.

Civic virtue in Western tradition then has two connotations: for human excellence and own happiness (Duncan and Burt, 1995); and for public or common good (Dagger, 1997; Warren, 2001), though the two are consistent. In my research, I take the second connotations of civic virtue. I look at why and how individuals form online assemblages, if such assemblages bring public or common good, and if and how civic virtue works to produce civic participation and significance. These questions are addressed in Chapter 5 and 6.

Civic virtue is conceptualized as qualities or capacities, as knowledge and abilities, and as dispositions or traits of characters that a person is supposed to possess in the face of collective life (Kimpell, 2009). I take these multiple conceptualizations as different dimensions of civic virtue and address in chapters from 6 to 9. For my research, what matters is not which dimension of civic virtue we are expecting to discover but how civic virtue can be useful to unpack in a nuanced way the public sphere and online civil society that some researchers see on China's social media. I therefore put these dimensions under one examination: practice. I look at civic virtue practices that contribute to the collective life in online assemblages.

Frega distinguishes intrinsic and extrinsic conception of virtue: the former conceptualizes the exercise of virtue as part of the good it is conducive to whereas the latter values the exercise of virtue for the external outcome that it is conducive to (2019: 189). The former is related to the argument that the exercise of civic virtue is symbiotic with individual's self-fulfilment (Duncan and Burt, 1995) and the latter is related to the more common argument that the exercise of civic virtue is good for civic virtue-related concepts like citizenship and democracy. I mainly look at the extrinsic dimension of civic virtue in chapters from 6 to 9.

In most literature on civic virtue, it is symbiotic with the concept of citizenship. That civic virtue is virtue to be a good citizen transcends theoretical and philosophical disagreements from republicanism (Honohan, 2002), liberalism (Sistare, 2004), and republican liberalism (Dagger, 1997). The concept of citizenship invites even more arguments, and throws civic virtue into entanglement with concepts like rights and obligations, autonomy and interdependence, freedom and control, self-government and so on. Basically, citizenship is conceptualized as legal status (Dagger, 1997) and as "the formal relation between a person and a nation-state" (Hintz et al, 2019: 22). A broader understanding of citizenship is to take it as membership of various ranges of organization (Graham, 2000) and therefore

adds social dimension to civic virtue as a political concept. Citizenship in this loose sense means membership of any collective. Therefore there are broad sense of citizenship which means membership of any collective as well as a narrow sense which means a member of a state, since state can be considered a political community (Honohan, 2002). My research takes this elasticity or multi-layered conceptualization of citizenship and correspondingly civic virtue at both social and political orientation.

The plural form of the term, or what counts as civic virtue, is always normative in relevant literature, though normative with different configurations. For example, civic virtue is associated with citizenship (Dahlgren, 2002; 2009), citizen's virtue and personal virtue (Costa, 2009), civic responsibility (Sleeper, 2007), freedom (Kimpell, 2015), and democracy (Warren, 2001; Snow, 2018). Furthermore, civic virtues are applied to special areas, for example, civic virtues for the urban (Cunningham, 2011), environmental civic virtues (Treanor, 2010), civic virtues from the media and communication perspective (Dahlgren, 2009; Hess, 2016), etc. Besides, Snow (2018) proposes country specific civic virtues, for example, hope as a democratic civic virtue for the United States. Therefore, there are many proposed civic virtues according to different given situations. For example, Grönlund et al propose political knowledge, efficacy, trust, and preparedness for political and other collective action as civic virtues in terms of democratic deliberation (2010) whereas Webb documents suggestions of civic virtues from talks of Chilean indigenous youths about ethnic belongings in everyday life (2014). Warren, after listing some individual virtues or ethical goods that are good for democracy as civic virtues, including "attentiveness to the common good and concerns for justice; tolerance of the views of others; willingness to participate, deliberate, and listen" and so on (2001: 73), also argues that reciprocity, trust, and recognition are civic virtues (ibid: 75). In this research, I focus on situations concerning online assemblages that make civic virtues and detect such civic virtues as well.

Based on the above literature, I conceptualize civic virtue as frame of mind like dispositions, characters, beliefs and so on and behavioural acts like habits, patterns of acts, etc. that are good both for collectives at various sizes and for the society in general. This definition reflects several criteria defining civic virtue. Firstly, besides the prevailing conceptualization of civic virtue as virtue for common good (Dagger, 1997; Kimpell, 2009; 2015; Frega, 2019), what are considered civic virtues are necessary for participation in online assemblages. Secondly, what is considered "good"

combines normative perspectives from civic virtue literature and empirical perspectives from ethnographic data. Collectives at various sizes correspond to online assemblages and society in general puts limits on certain online assemblages where members' practices may be beneficial to the members but harmful to the society in general. This criterion of civic virtue highlights the awareness of uncivil behaviour in online assemblages including but not limited to uses of online dirty words, verbal abuse, discursive frictions intentionally bred by paid posters (Jiang, 2016), disinformation, rumours, and sensational worded posts for commercial benefits occasionally observed in my sites. Thirdly, I conceptualize civic virtues as time, space, and circumstance specific. Therefore, my research is the study of social media users' civic virtues in online assemblages in China. In these given situations, the civic and the political are overlapping at the level of social interactions in collective efforts, similar to "the social role of citizenship" (Frega, 2019: 188), but divergent when contentious activities and public concerns are involved, which are conceptualized as the political. The civic virtues to be explored then will be configured in given situations of online assemblage participation. I look at civic virtues emerge from online assemblage practices and at how civic virtue could be used to examine the channelling of social and civic practices. To do this, I am concerned with the specific social conditions of China, which will be detailed next.

1.4 Political Economy of Social Media in China

Contemporary China is distinctive for two phenomena: an authoritative party-state and a society experiencing huge neoliberalizing social-economic transformations (Li, 2009; King et al, 2013; Rauchfleisch and Schäfer, 2015; Su, 2016; Shao and Wang, 2017). These two factors are entangled and reflected in the development of the Internet and social media in China, resulting in a control-contention dichotomy on changes that are witnessed in China in the past two decades (Dong, 2012; Mou et al, 2013; Liu, 2015; Tai, 2015; Tong, 2015; Deluca et al, 2016; Li et al, 2016; Su, 2016; Chen et al, 2018).

Social media services in China are provided by privately owned (mostly Chinese) companies specifically for the country as a "local" market within the boundary of the Great Firewall, which blocks the access to foreign social media platforms and news websites for most Internet users in China (MacKinnon, 2011; King et al, 2013; Wang, 2016; Roberts, 2018). As private companies, Chinese social media platforms yearn to make profits and are

therefore not immune from the criticisms that some scholars make on Western social media companies. For example, Faucher (2018) argues that social media platforms exploit social media users for profit; Couldry and Dijck (2015) argue that social media platforms install a specific kind of the “social” for economic value. Different from their Western counterparts, Chinese social media platforms are subject to stringent government regulations and censorship requirements (Sullivan, 2012: 773) and execute rigorous content censorship on their users generated content according to government’s guidelines. This may shape the social and the civic practices seen in the online in China.

On the national policy level, the development of the Internet technologies has always been one of the priorities of the state to “deliberately integrate network connectivity and networked applications into the country’s key national strategy for economic restructuring” (Hong, 2017: 1186); to promote the Internet economy sector and information/Internet infrastructure (Jia and Winseck, 2018) as economic growth point; to build a technological and scientific world giant; and to turn China into a cyberpower (CNNIC, 2020). It is the government’s massive efforts that propel the emergence of giant Internet companies that provide various social media services in China. And these companies, as Jia and Winseck argue, are both delegated to “extraordinary policing, monitoring, and censoring powers” by Chinese government and dependent on finance capital from abroad (2018: 31).

The government’s vigorous efforts in supporting the expanding of latest information and communication technologies infrastructure into small urban and rural towns (McDonald, 2016; Wang, 2016) help the prevalence of social media and online assemblages in China. According to the latest statistics, around 65% of Chinese total population access the Internet, or 900 million Internet users, via mobile phones (CNNCC, 2020). Chinese social media users use social media services that are “state tolerated” (Sullivan, 2012: 773) and controlled.

Chinese government’s two-hand-grip policy on promoting and control of social media contributes to the networked authoritarianism argument which suggests that collective expressions on websites and social media platforms, followed and sometimes calling the attention of the state to make corresponding policy changes, gives average users a sense of greater freedom (MacKinnon, 2011; Li et al, 2016). But there is no guarantee of individual rights and freedoms (MacKinnon, 2011: 33). The control of social media, MacKinnon points out, is possible by Chinese government handing

many censorship and surveillance task to private social media service providers. “Every one of China’s large Internet companies has a special department full of employees whose sole job is to police users and censor content,” by complying with government’s updating list of sensitive words (2011: 38).

In addition to access censorship like the Great Firewall and content censorship, Roberts (2018) argues other ways of censorship including the use of distraction and diversion of social media users’ attention by increasing cost of getting information and by flooding online propaganda and astroturfing to dilute the information that authoritarian government wants to hide. Wrapping up the above arguments is the argument of five layers of control mechanisms on China’s Internet, “ranging from the government, service and content providers to webmasters to individual users” (Dong, 2012: 403). Except the government, the rest of the above control mechanisms work based on self-censorship (MacKinnon, 2011; Dong, 2012; Roberts, 2018) generated by fears of various forms of punishment made by the government (MacKinnon, 2011; Roberts, 2018). The influence of censorship on civic practices in online assemblages is examined in Chapter 9.

Apart from censorship, what complicates the political economic environment of social media in China is the prevalence of massive paid posters hired by various commercial organizations to inflate certain information and influence information disseminating on social media, termed as online water army (Yu et al, 2015), in addition to paid posters hired by various level of government, or the so-called Wumao Party (King et al, 2013). Their influence on civic practices in China’s online assemblages are felt by my respondents.

Together with the political control and various commercial involvement on China’s social media is a society long been argued to rise in various form of social organizations and associations, a civil society (Goodman and Hooper eds, 1994; Brook and Frolic eds, 1997; Wang, ed, 2011; Ma, 2006), facilitated by and co-evolved with China’s Internet and social media development (Yang, 2003a; 2003b; 2009). Research written in English on the civil society in China is thought to be based on a state-society opposition heart (Bergère, 1997), with which I agree, though some argue a supportive relationship between civil society and the state (Frolic, 1997; Hildebrandt, 2013). The conflicting academic findings and arguments reveal a complicated relation between the state and the society in China. Besides, civil society online (Jiang, 2016) is argued both to be conditioned by the

authoritarian regime (Zhang and Nyíri, 2014) and to be a contentious space between the society and the state (Yang, 2009; 2014).

Neoliberalizing China's economy and market accompanies the individualization trend in China (Yan, 2009; Hansen and Svarverud, eds. 2010). Individualization is a process not only breaking with past social norms and cultural customs but also bringing changes to individual-state relations in authoritarian China (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2010). This process, together with the lack of rights and freedoms enjoyed in the Western societies in terms of speech, expression, association, and collective action; tighter control on social media; capitalism and commercialism on social media and in China in general, are social context in which this research was conducted, online assemblage participation examined, data collected and findings interpreted. The examination of civic practices and civic virtue in particular in this context is very different from Western democracies where political theories on the civic and civic virtue are addressed in the "accusation" that citizens are increasingly not fulfilling their democratic role. Moreover, Chinese culture will be paid special attention too since it fosters classical understanding of terms like public and private which are very different from the West (Ma, 2006). Considering China's context, I take a broader understanding of civic virtues and relevant concepts like the civic and citizenship.

1.5 Structure of Chapters

This thesis is organized into ten chapters. The rest nine chapters are as follows.

Chapter 2: Literature Review. The literature includes civic virtue, social media and civic engagement, social media and collective actions, prevalence of online groups on social media, social media and private-public dichotomy.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework. This chapter details media as practice theory as the theoretical framework of this research. It starts with the origin of media as practice theory and provides critical account of the main content of the theory. It then explains why this theory fits the study of social media and my research. Lastly I introduce briefly ANT and technology as practice theory as supplementary theoretical frameworks.

Chapter 4: Methodology. This chapter presents the methodology of this research, that is, online ethnography including online interview and online

observation without participation, and justifies why they are the methods to answer my research questions. The chapter describes and justifies major concerns and steps in data collection in fieldwork: sampling, sites, entry and exit, and the conduct of online interview and online observation. It then describes and justifies thematic analysis as major data coding method and ends with justifications of how an ethical social media research is achieved by following principles of respondents first, respondents-led, minimal interference, and ethics as collaborative and creative.

Chapter 5: Multiplicities of Online Assemblages Participation and Collectivity. This chapter summarizes descriptively the findings from my fieldwork, laying foundations for the following empirical analysis. It then theorizes the findings on multiple self and participation in social media assemblages as the context of reflecting civic virtue in the collective life created by multiple and diverse online assemblage participation. It points out the social context where civic virtues may be practiced.

Chapter 6: Civic Virtue and Collective Virtue. This chapter uses the concepts of civic virtue and social capital to interpret two kinds of data: individual's civic virtuous acts and collective social interactions that have civic outcomes, conceptualized as collective virtue, in online strangers assemblages. By examining civic virtues like simultaneous and translatable reciprocal acts, online help, mutuality and sharing, and collective virtues which are based on self-regard, it finds out that both civic virtuous acts and social interactions with civic outcomes occur in social interactions.

Chapter 7: Intertwining of the Public and the Private Dimensions. This chapter examines intense social interactions both in close assemblages made up of strangers and close-circle networks, composed of real-life acquaintances. Mutual triggering of the social and the civic are found in different ways in these assemblages owing to the different ways the public and the private are integrated.

Chapter 8: Online Activism and Civic Virtues. This chapter explores civic virtues detected from amateur activists who conducted different means of online activism in online assemblages. It points out the locality of civic virtues, that is, different civic virtues practiced in responses to different online activism in different online assemblages. It also finds disconnection between activists, that is, amateur activists do not intend to associate with other activists for planned and organized collective actions. They prefer individual participation in ad hoc online collective actions.

Chapter 9: Internet Event and Civic Virtues. This chapter looks at the practices of civic virtues in special circumstances in the early stage of coronavirus outbreak in China, which caused the largest Internet event in years. It points out several connections explicated in this extreme circumstance: the connections between daily civic virtues and circumstantial civic virtues; the blending of the social and the civic; and the connection between strangers assemblages and close-group social networks. These connections explain large-scale online collective actions.

Chapter 10: Conclusion. This chapter integrates theorizations on empirical findings from Chapter 5 to 9 and reflect on how technology-assisted civic practices inform normative concepts like civic virtue, citizenship, and civil society. I detail the nuanced reconceptualization of these normative concepts and demonstrate the limitations of my research in the end.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Social media have been researched a lot for their role in civic and political participation. To unpack civic practices on social media, the relationship between the social and the civic as two perspectives on collective life is firstly examined. Online assemblages, as a site and form of collective life in the online, are found prevalent in social media age. Literature on prevalence of online assemblages shows the width of social relations brought online and the variety of forms that social relations are grouped. Social media are found not only to group people into online assemblages, but also be sites and means for people to take collective actions, which are argued as civic and political participation. Large collective actions in the social media are influential but not frequent. So the arguments on the civic significance of everyday uses of social media are reviewed. Lastly, literature on social media and social change in China is reviewed to build a background for the following presentation of my findings and analysis. The review of literature builds a reference for comparing with my empirical findings presented in the following chapters and a foundation for theorizations of my findings, and highlights gaps that this research attempts to address.

2.2 The Social, the Civic, and Social Media

The core of social science, suggested by anthropologists Miller et al, is the study of “the way in which people associate with each other to form social relations and societies” (2016: 3). Whereas for political scientists, citizens’ associating is an important part of civic life (Paxton and Rap, 2016). The social and the civic, in certain sense, are overlapping terms that are conceptualized from different perspectives. The civic is from a perspective that looks at people in a specific role, citizens, and specific relations at two dimensions: between citizens and between citizens and government (Saldivar et al, 2019).

Tocqueville (2002) theorized the civic with an emphasis on the social aspect in his highlight of the importance of civil association in democracy as uniting citizens for cooperation in achieving common goals collectively and independently of external force, particularly that of government, and he argued that civil associations and political associations facilitate each other

symbiotically. The civic, then, is the “social” with common goals in terms of association, which entails long-term persistent social interactions (Paxton and Rap, 2016). Associational life becomes an important configuration of civic and political engagement in democracy, to form collective will (Chandler, 2014) and to instil democratic values (Zhang, 2014).

Social media relates to the social and the civic relationship by arguably facilitating both. It is the only media that is defined on sociality (Solan and Quan-Haase, 2017). It is also argued for affording connectivity (Dijck, 2012; Chambers, 2013): interactivity (Loader and Mercea, 2012), sharing (Trottier, 2012; Tierney, 2013; Evans, 2015; Highfiled, 2016), participation (Hinton and Hjorth 2013), connecting (Trottier, 2012; Tierney, 2013; Highfiled, 2016) and networking (Loader and Mercea, 2012; Hinton and Hjorth 2013; Milan, 2013; Highfiled, 2016). These features contribute to the argument that social media is part of civic technology, or information and communication technologies which facilitate both connection and collaboration between citizens and the service of the government to citizens in democratic governance (Saldivar et al, 2019: 170). Inter-citizen and citizen-state become the two layers of the civic. Democracy is the normative pre-assumption of Western literature on the civic and political role that social media is argued to play on associational life.

Some researchers approach association from Tocquevillian perspective by connecting it to democracy, social capital and civil society (Warren, 2001; Boyd, 2004; Maloney et al., 2008) or by arguing that associational life provides associational goods like teaching enlightened self-interest, creating feelings of efficacy, protecting individuality and establishing meritocratic norms via the medium of online games (Schulzke, 2011). Online games, argues Schulzke, provide a context in which individuals are brought together for cooperative activity (2011: 359). Cooperative activity is suggested as associational life, so are social interactions to share information and maintain relations for offline civic activities (Zhang, 2014). This loose conceptualization of association is echoed by Paxton and Rap (2016) who argue that hobby, interest, topic, and identity groups on social media website are grassroots informal associations whose members have associational life. According to Paxton and Rap (ibid), what are termed as informal associations are informal groups showing the following features: voluntary, in the form of group, membership. They quote a conceptualization of informal association as informal groups "characterized by minimal (if any) rules of membership or governance, weak obligations, and strong

attachment" (Paxon and Rap, 2016: 214). Schulzke defines civil associations as those which have no direct political effect and are formed on the basis of interests (2011: 358). The focus on interests as binding force to group people voluntarily is similar to what Oakeshott argues as enterprise or purposive association, in which people pursue a variety of self-chosen ends, in contrast to civil associations concerned with means people are obliged to respect in conduct (Boyd, 2004: 605). Warren also emphasizes the importance of shared interests and purposes that primarily constitute associations (2001: 54). Warren goes one step further to argue the difference between association and associational relations. Associational relations are a kind of operative organization based on voluntary and consensual qualities in contrast to bureaucracy and market as operative organizations of the state and the economy (ibid).

Associational life is argued to generate social capital and form civil society (Warren, 2001; Boyd, 2004; Maloney et al., 2008). The concept of social capital has been trapped in heated discussions on its definition, components, forms, functions, dimensions, similes to capital, and above all, measures (Fine, 2001; Robinson et al, 2002; Halpern, 2005; Field, 2008). Yet, there is a consensus that social capital is a means to evaluate relationships, mostly inter-personal social relationship. James Coleman (1988), one of the founding fathers of the concept, defined social capital as a resource for action and brings the social-civic link of the concept by arguing that the value of social capital as resource is realized by doing public good, or benefit for society in general. Putnam (2000) continues this conceptualization of social capital as a public good generator though he also adds a "private face," or benefit to individuals, to the "public face". He defines social capital as "connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam, 2000: 16). By using the concept to do a thorough "check-up" to political and civic associations as well as social connections in American society, Putnam wraps up all collective participation or activities in the concept of social capital and argues the civic outcome of social relations.

Quan-Haase and Wellman propose that social capital has two complementary uses: interpersonal social contact and civic engagement (2004: 113). This conceptualization combines the social and the civic. They (2004) argue that Internet adds on to social capital a social contact dimension both at individual level and online community level. Its result is argued to be informal social support between social media users because of

the pervasive awareness provided by social media (Lu and Hampton, 2017). Zúñica et al (2017) argue the emergence of social media social capital as a different mode from face-to-face social capital and these two modes of social capital have different effect on online and offline political participation, therefore forming complementary relations. These findings show different nature of connections on social media from those offline and correspondingly different social capitals arose from each kind of connection (Zúñica et al, 2017). In another study, Zúñica et al (2012) argue that using social media for news enhances people's social capital, civic engagement and political participation. News seeking, consuming, opinion expressing, sharing, and discussing are considered civic engagement by many researchers and social media and social capital are both argued to play a positive role in these respects (Holton et. al, 2015; Choi and Shin, 2017). "News-involved" activities on social media complicate the intertwining of the social and the civic.

The social and the civic, as two perspectives on conceptualizing interpersonal and individual-collective interactions and communications, are "united" in associational life and social capital theories. Social media are argued to play a facilitating role from both theoretical perspectives. Both theoretical perspectives focus on the theoretical effect of individuals' relations, associational and social, on civic engagement but pay little attention to the practices of such relations, particularly in the context of the prevalence of social media assemblages. My empirical chapters address this gap.

2.3 Prevalence of Online Assemblages on Social Media

Dijk (2012) points out that social media sites' architecture pushes users to constantly connect to others and to promote the formation of new groups and communities for economic gains. Indeed, online assemblages, or online communities as the earliest name, "have become one of the most popular forms of online services globally" since their introduction over 20 years ago (Malinen, 2015: 228). Earlier social media technologies like website discussion groups, BBS, forums, and alumni groups are still popular today. Meanwhile there are many new developments, such as various health, hobby, interest, identity, topic, and video games groups on both websites and apps. Facebook, WhatsApp and other big names have numerous groups on them (Black et al, 2011; Wang et al, 2013). There are also loose assemblages, like "hashtag publics" usually seen on Twitter and similar

social media through use of a common hashtag, which are built on or after an event (Baym, 2015: 106). These online assemblages may dissolve or paralyze after the event. Also seen on Twitter and other blogging and microblogging sites are numerous rather loose assemblages centred on an account and its followers termed by some as issue-based groups (Wang and Shi, 2018). These are similar to what are called "personalized communities" (Baym, 2015: 100) as seen on sites like Facebook in an age of "networked individualism" (Rainie and Wellman, 2012: 1). On Facebook and similar social network sites, users organize their own self-centred groups and/or access groups that they are invited. Besides, there are many types of specialized assemblages, like the online question and answering community (Jin et al., 2013), communities of practice intended for learning or professionals, enterprise communities or communities of transaction, creative communities including open-source software development (Malinen, 2015), and online migrants communities (Schoorten, 2012) and so on. The spreading prevalence of online assemblages complicates the domination of them by "digital elite" (Breuer et al, 2015), or early adopters of such technologies usually either with technological specialties and professional knowledge or activism motivations, who arguably played an important role in Arab Spring (Breuer et al, 2015).

Online assemblage captures more flexible, varied, changeable, and competitive organizing of people on social media (Wang et al, 2013). However, prevalence of online assemblages is picked up by scholarship more as a background together with the social media popularity than being a phenomenon to study (Fernandes et al, 2010; Woolley et al, 2010; Black et al, 2011; Gregory, 2015). Among the few studies that take online assemblages as object of study, some notable empirical findings have been seen.

The first is that civic engagement is embedded in many types of online assemblages. Participation in online assemblages, political or not, is argued to have a positive relation with civic and political engagement. Political group membership on social media assemblage is argued to enhance offline political participation, though it does not enhance political knowledge (Conroy et al, 2012). Social media assemblages provide chances and trials for young people to join political groups (Ekström and Sveningsson, 2019). For professional assemblages and acquaintance assemblages, news is often shared and discussed, arguably bringing civic engagement for members (Ballantyne et al, 2017; Swart et al, 2019). In general, Bouchillon

argues that Facebook groups include “weak-tie discussions, bridging social connections, civic participation, and generalized trust” (2019: 623). Social media assemblages become important spaces of networked publics (Ballantyne et al, 2017).

Secondly, multi-membership, or multiple participation in online assemblages, is a common finding in empirical studies. In social movement studies, multi-membership is argued to help form “flexible network-domains” in social movement mobilizations, which enable publics as self-organized online social assemblages to move in and out of formal and institutional civic organizations (Yuan et al, 2019). For young people, shifting between political assemblages is argued as means to try out and work on reflexive membership (Ekström and Sveningsson, 2019). Whereas for multi-membership in acquaintance assemblages, it is found that individuals show different mode of engagement in terms of sharing news and current affairs in different assemblages following norms of each one (Swart et al, 2019). For online assemblages with different purposes, shifting between same type of assemblages becomes a common practice. Yet, shifting between different types of online assemblages is not researched yet.

Thirdly, more diverse range of social relations is brought online and organized into nuanced assemblages, bringing more complicated interactions between the social and the civic. As Miller et al point out, social media assemblages range from the most private to most public (2016: 3). The bringing of acquaintance relationships or weak ties onto social media results in different kinds of private online assemblages including location-based, work-related and leisure-oriented ones. Among such online assemblages, it is argued that news and current affairs have a social function and connective role (Swart et al, 2019).

The above literature focuses on regular membership of online assemblages and how practices of such membership play a role in civic engagement. As pointed out earlier, there are also transient online assemblages which highlight temporary collective actions.

2.4 Social Media and Collective Actions

Social media is argued to be a mobilizing technology in social movements (Milan, 2013) and offers affordances in collective actions (Zheng and Yu, 2016). It is found to be indispensable in large-scale collective actions because it combines communication with mobilization, organization,

coordination, and participation. This has been demonstrated by research on the Arab Spring (Nanabhay, and Farmanfarmaian, 2011; Rane and Salem, 2012; Breuer et al, 2015; Oh et al, 2015; Miladi, 2016) and Occupy Movement (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Thorson et al, 2013; Theocharis et al, 2015; Yuan et al, 2019). Bennett and Segerberg distinguish two kinds of organization of contentious political engagement for both of which social media are indispensable: collective action and connective action (2013: 1-2). The former refers to political participation organized and brokered by formal organizations while the latter refers to action organized digitally via digital networks of individuals (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013: 2), or decentralized and self-organized collective action (Wang and Chu, 2019). These two terms bear some resemblance to the distinction between formal and informal modes of civic engagement. The former refers to civic engagement in institutional contexts organized by formal social movement organizations and NGOs whereas the latter refers to decentralized, non-professional and non-hierarchical resistance (Uldam and Vestergaard, 2015). Bennett and Segerberg's concepts are more technology-assisted though. Decentralized and non-hierarchical are terms used to describe networks (Scott, 2013), thus corresponding to Bennett and Segerberg's conceptualization of connective action (2015).

Connective actions are offline ones dependent on social media as organizing tool. There are also online self-organized collective actions which are not only organized by social media but also occurring on social media, termed by Yang (2016b) as hashtag activism. Such kind of collective actions is found quite dependent on influential people or organization's social media accounts (Wang and Chu, 2019). Both types of collective actions are achieved mainly via information seeking and sharing on social networking sites (Mercea et al, 2020). Therefore, although both connective actions and online collective actions are social media brokered and enabled, individuals' information activities and facilities, for example, networks or online assemblages, are vital. Yet, few literature points out the importance of social network in online assemblage in such collective action (Siegel, 2009) or the relationship between online information sharing network/assemblage and social network.

Collective action, online or offline or hybrid of both, is an important form of political participation. Yet, as Margetts et al (2015) point out, most mobilizations of collective action fail. Social media affordances play an

important role in successful large-scale collective actions, but their civic significance is seen in everyday life too.

2.5 Social Media and Everyday Civic Practice

The everyday had been argued and researched as a terrain of practice with political significance before the Internet age. French philosophers and sociologists De Certeau and Lefebvre, among others, were two leading scholars in this respect. Both set the examination of the everyday in capitalism consumer society. Lefebvre argued that the problematic of the city arose when social needs of residents were not satisfied by commercial and bureaucratic forces. The problematic of the city, then, turns the everyday life in the city a cause and site of political actions for the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]). De Certeau, on the other hand, detailed some everyday trivialities as tactical subversion to commercial powers (1984). Everyday quotidian acts demonstrate political meaning in such interpretations. More radical than Lefebvre's theoretical arguments and De Certeau's theoretical analysis are the so-called situationists who called for and practiced revolutionary transformation of the capitalist society by transforming everyday life (Plant, 1992). For all these French thinkers, everyday life is not only the space where capitalism conquers by commodification and consumerism, but also the battlefield for overthrowing such conquest.

In the Internet age, the examination of the everyday is partly turned into the online. For example, Correll (1995) examines how electronic community is built on computer bulletin board system by participants' daily interactions on it. Everyday social interactions demonstrate civic significance in such community. There are at least two bases of everyday civic practice on social media. One is the suggested online vigilance, or users' permanent cognitive orientation towards online content and communication, including online assemblages, and disposition to use them (Reinecke et al, 2018). Social media is not only embedded and embodied in everyday life (Hine, 2017), it also keeps users permanently connected to it, and via it to their online communication (Reinecke et al, 2018). The other is the argued private-public collapse owing to social media use. Researchers use different terms to argue what they observe: personalization of public sphere and politics (Papacharissi, 2010; Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Highfield, 2016); new person-focused social operating system termed as the networked individualism (Wellman et. al, 2003; Rainie and Wellman, 2012); and the

blurring of the public and the private (Hinton and Hjorth 2013). These researchers use the “old” private-public dichotomy to argue for the integration of the two.

The mutual penetration of the private and the public has long been an argument. For example, politics in everyday life setting like private political talk (Östman, 2013) and political talk at home (Nolas et al, 2017); the politicization of everyday life, that is, democracy circulates through personal decisions made in everyday life (Chandler, 2014: 42); practicing citizenship in daily life (Staeheli et al, 2012). When social media become the sites and setting of various politics in everyday life, in addition to the public-private collapse as the above literature shows, the reorganizations and mixes of various elements that arguably compose the public or the private are more nuanced. This research aims to unpack these nuances by ethnographically listen to and observe social media user’s participation of online assemblages. Political knowledge, news, public space, identity as citizen, (formal) association membership, public concern, etc. are elements that compose public whereas gossip, life matters, home, family and friends, entertainment and leisure, self-interest, etc. are considered private. Social media uses facilitate the intersections of elements in these two categories.

Among others, two authors pay special attention to the role of social media in everyday civic and political practices. One is Highfield who argues that the personal and the political are always interlinked and social media furthers such interlink, by involving the political (events, news, circumstances, etc.) in the mundane uses of social media with other life trivial people do with and on social media, which produce collective but personal way of political expression and engagement in the non-specifically-for-political-engagement online spaces, represented by humour, memes, sentiment, sarcasm, and snarky commentary in hashtags and retweets in response to political events and news reporting (2016). This is a kind of spontaneous political engagement (Snow and Moss, 2014), triggered by interweaving of complex conditions including but not limited to non-hierarchical movement, emotional priming, sentiment, personal social media rituals, etc. (Snow and Moss, 2014; Highfield, 2016).

Highfield (2016) focuses on the personal informal following, commenting and retweeting of political content as personal politics and following, commenting and retweeting of personal contentious content as politicizing the personal on social media. Whereas Papacharissi (2010) concentrates on the private sphere where she argues democracy is practiced by social media users. The

private sphere, mainly the private environment, spaces, and moment where and when people use social media, is argued to be the locus of civic actions or public-oriented activities because people feel safe and have control in this sphere. In and from the private sphere people make private expression of citizenship out of privatized political conscience via public broadcasting on social media to multiple and selected audience (Papacharissi, 2010). If Highfield points out informal “form” of personal political expression as engagement on social media, Papacharissi stresses the private location and space where political expressions on social media occur. In contrast and reference to these “layers” or dimensions to exploring the civic “content” generated on social media, I look at not only how such civic content is generated but also the civic significance of social content generated in online assemblages.

In addition to form and location, arguments on social media and everyday civic engagement are diverse. Everyday sociality on social media groups, or meeting new people with overlapping interests, is argued to be civic participation because it increases social capital by increasing weak ties and trust with strangers (Bouchillon, 2019). Graham et al (2016) also argue that everyday online spaces of discussion forums on lifestyle issues can cultivate political talk and actions aimed at government or other authorities. Besides “incidental” political talk in non-political online space (Yu, 2016), social media is argued to be places to develop everyday informal political talk among some age groups, for example, young people (Mascheroni and Murru, 2017). Everyday uses of social media and social media assemblages are argued to increase encounter of news and current affairs and sharing and discussion of them (Swart et al, 2019), or incidental exposure to news (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018; Boczkowski et al, 2018). News consumption is argued to be related to political participation (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018). Everyday uses of social media are also argued to draw ordinary people into everyday networked activism which traverses quotidian activities and movement participation when social movement occurs (Ting, 2019).

So far, the literature reviewed is about everyday civic practice on social media in democratic societies, where citizens are “accused of” not fulfilling citizens’ right and responsibility like voting and voicing in protest or other collective actions. Social media is argued as an alternative space where civic engagement and political participation occur in traditional public sphere ways (Habermas, 1989) and non-traditional ways to demonstrate that civic participation is not weakened, as Putnam argues (2000), but is in another

arena and/or in other forms. Whereas in authoritarian China where citizenship and civic engagement are defined and controlled by the government and contentious political expressions are censored and collective actions discouraged and suppressed, social media is argued to be significant not only as an alternative arena for civic and political participation, but also as *the* arena for civic and political engagement for many ordinary people.

2.6 Social Media and Social Change in China

The relation between technology and democracy is one of the major research frames on social media worldwide. English-language literature,² earlier on Internet and now on social media in China, also takes the technology-democracy frame and considers Internet and social media both as tools to empower society and arena of society-state contention. Chinese scholarship on social media for Chinese readers, because of government funding of research, avoids regime-challenging contentious frame and usually studies social media in accordance with official ideologies.

Research written in English on Internet and social media in China positively associates the technologies with the trend of rise of civil society in China (Yang, 2003a; 2003b; 2014; Zhang and Zheng eds., 2009; Mou, et al. 2013; deLisle et al. eds, 2016; Tu, 2016; Xie et al, 2017). Here, civil society is used as a framework to theorize not only social media and social changes, but also changing power relation between the state and society in China (Ma, 2006). Civil society is a contested concept and developed into many different interpretations in different historical time and societies (Keane, 1998). Salmenkari (2013) argues that civil society as a Western theory cannot be applied to studying contemporary China owing to the argued tight control of the state on society and the lack of horizontal link between social sectors in society, also due to government control. Control versus resistance is then argued as the main frame in studies on China's political communication on digital media and the main theme of research among others in research on social media in China (Herold and Marolt, 2011). Such frame and theme are usually examined in event and conflict on social media and Guan (2019)

² English-language literature here and in the following sections refers to English publications on researching social media in China. These publications are made by Western scholars, Asian scholars, and Chinese scholars as well.

calls to look at individuals' everyday civic discussions and engagement in contemporary China, which is exactly what this project is about.

In arguing social media's effect on civil society in China, deLisle et al point out new media have changed "the fabric of China's civil society" (2016: 1) by being the site for civic discourse (Wei, 2014) and civic engagement (Svensson, 2016; Ye et al., 2017), though mainstream civil society literature is still about "organizational" online civic activities. Such activities in formal way are seen in the active use of social media by non-governmental organizations (NGO) (Shi, 2013; Zhao and Pan, 2016). Informal ways refer to those activities made by "the large numbers of online communities, web-based social networks and loose organizations, as well as the active online presence of offline civic associations" (Yang, 2009: 20). Combining formal and informal organizational civic engagement, Yang, a long-term proponent of social media and the rise of civil society in China, argues that social media is not only useful tools for formal civil organizations, but are also sites for a digital civil society on which exist civic association, civic spaces of communication and civic action (2009). Most of this conceptualization overlaps with online assemblage in this research.

Whether digital civil society is useful or not to conceptualize civic significance of social media in China is not the concern of this research, what is concerned is the highlighting of communities, networks, and loose organizations on social media, which echoes my research interest. Yet, neither Yang nor subsequent researchers explore in depth civic associations or associations as such. This aspect is picked up by an ethnographic study of online backpacking communities which argues that web-based groups, or hobby groups in this research, formed by like-minded people conduct online activism, take collective actions, and develop associational life (Zhang, 2014). Though developing good exploration of online/offline integration and important conclusions, the research does not tell what associational life is and whether it refers to online or offline or both. It seems that, according to the descriptions, online interactions, regular offline meetings and backpack travelling, and doing offline charitable activities together with promoting a strong sense of community and belonging are argued as associational life (ibid). My research goes one step further to look at: firstly, not only what people do in online assemblages, but also what they say about what they do; and secondly, what people do in multiple online assemblages beyond interest and hobby groups. That is, I not only examine what associational life

on social media is observed in empirical chapters, but also look at what associational life means for individuals' civic virtues in the last chapter.

An important part of online civil society is the organizational use of social media by NGOs and other civil groups. Shi (2013) finds that most NGOs in China use microblogging, particularly those with medium financial support. Zheng and Yu (2016) argue that Sina Weibo³ provide affordances for small NGOs to use digital means to form virtual organization: recruit participants, mobilize resources, distribute collaborations, frame collective actions and establish legitimacy, all done online. Besides the common uses of social media by NGOs to enrol the public, share information, mobilize resources, and improve organizational legitimacy, Zhou and Pan (2016) find that some NGOs also post popular topics to attract and interact with followers to build community.

Another important type of online organizational activities is similar to Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) conceptualization of connective action, though it is totally online. And it is here that researches on social media in China written in English introduce the concept of contentious politics and civic engagement (for example, Yang, 2014; Gleiss, 2015). The Internet in China, and social media in particular, has been proposed as "battlefield" between control and resistance politically and a tool for ordinary users' collective organization (Harold and Marolt, 2011). Yet, resistance, collective organization, and collective actions in China's circumstances mean very different things from those in Western societies. In political studies of social media in China, contentious politics are discursive struggles (Gleiss, 2015); collective political action and participation refer to collective performance by online users in the form of joining online conversations in forums or BBS about public affairs, policies and public officials (Ye et al, 2017) as well as tweeting, retweeting and commenting on them (Liu, 2015). Liu (2015) argues that by showing concerns about public events, exposing information about them, commenting on them and retweeting news and comments about them, and showing emotional responses to them, users of Sina Weibo, the major microblogging social media site in China, show collaborative and collective actions and form unity of emotion and identity. These collective actions are usually triggered by news events and the exposure of information (either from traditional media's reporting or online users' exposure) and the "effect"

³ The only microblogging social media platform left in China. Also named as Weibo.

of such participation is evaluated by monitoring the responsive action by the government or if there is large volume of "content" so that public opinion can be said to be formed. This kind of online collective action is termed "Internet event" in China.

By mainly examining Internet events, researchers argue that social media becomes online public sphere (Dong et al, 2017; Xie et al, 2017) and contentious public sphere (Lei, 2018) and the function of online collective actions on the Internet is to challenge the state (Zheng and Wu, 2005). Internet events are conceptualized as main cases and configurations of Chinese Internet users' collective online political participation that are effective to trigger government responses and are usually used as case studies to look at political activism on China's Internet (Jiang, 2014; Liu, 2015; Tai, 2015; Wu and Yang, 2015; Zheng and Yu, 2016). Social media sites like forums, microblogging, and networking site are argued as the major spaces and tools for these influential events to brew, grow, gain momentum, and mobilize. However, who are mobilized and why they are mobilized are not concerns addressed by researchers.

As seen in Western literature on social movements, participation in collective civic and political action is assumed as fulfilling citizen's role. How citizen's role is defined and perceived in authoritarian condition is not considered.

Svensson picks up this gap by applying Bennett and Segerberg's connective action concept (2012) to China's Sina Weibo and argues new forms of civic engagement: issue-based civic engagement and individual ad hoc activities, both of which are transient, random, and incidental (2016). Svensson argues that these connective collective actions, though risking being clicktivism and slacktivism, are valuable in authoritarian China because they do bring effect: in some cases, bringing offline activities; in others bringing policy changes or government responses (ibid). My research looks further empirically at these new forms of civic engagement for more nuanced understanding of the context, circumstance, and practices of such engagement. My research also continues to fill up this gap by looking at more stable connective and informal civic participation: regular participating in online assemblages as collective actions (in general sense) as well as informal associations. I argue that by forming and/or joining online assemblages and taking part in regular interactions, users take collective actions to maintain the assemblage, to form and keep to its norm, to contribute to its dynamics so as to attract more members, to socialize with each other, to solve their own problems through others' help and help others as well, and to develop associational relations,

to organize online and offline activities in some cases (as seen in the online backpacking group in Zhang, 2014) and more. If and how this process cultivates individuals' civic virtues are investigated in Chapter 6.

Sullivan (2014) and Schneider (2016) are rather cautious about the role of social media in state-society relation in China when they concentrate on the censoring and utilizing of social media by government. Sautedé (2013) maintains that information and communication technologies in the past 20 years both empower society and strengthen the party-state in China owing to the state's tight control and censorship as well as economic incentives to develop technologies, and deLisle et al (2016) argue the state shows resilient adaptation to and utilization of the technologies. A detailed look at the government's censorship strategies in China suggests that Chinese authorities use the Internet skilfully to censor Internet. The uncovered strategies include increasing information access cost including time, money, and skill, and concealing by flooding online information to distract, confuse and do government propaganda (Roberts, 2018). The argument that Internet and authoritarianism co-evolved in China (deLisle et al, 2016) leads to the argument of networked authoritarianism which suggests that Internet users in China feel they have more freedom in the online but they do not have the right to freedom (MacKinnon, 2011). Li et al (2016) use the networked authoritarian theory in their research and argue that social media promotes both elements of civic culture, including political knowledge, social trust, sense of civic duty, internal and collective efficacy; and system support, that is, optimism about Chinese government since the authoritarian government exercises effective control and manipulation of online public opinion environment. By looking at social media use and civic virtues, this research hopes to develop a new angle to look at state-society relations in China beyond the control-resistance dichotomy implicit in the above research since government can control many things such as citizen's constitutional rights to freedom of speech and protest, social media technological affordances of reposting to be detailed in Chapter 9, but can hardly control the cultivation and practice of civic virtues. Moreover, control-resistance dichotomy has two blind spots. One is the everyday uses of social media and the other is the inter-citizen interactions on social media.

Organizational perspective on online civil society, public sphere(s), and collective (connective) actions pay insufficient attentions to daily practices of ordinary social media users. It anchors research on civic associations, political-themed forum and political topic groups, activism, Internet events,

and online-offline combined collective activities. These research interests are very important for understanding social media and social change in China, yet, they do not tell the whole story. They are the iceberg above the water and there is a much larger iceberg below the water which is the basis for the above one. And the underwater iceberg is ordinary Chinese social media users' daily practice on social media assemblages. This is not to say that ordinary social media users are not among those members in political forum or group, of activism and/or Internet events and collective actions. Instead, I aim to find out this empirically. And I take everyday social media practices as a "site" to look at civic engagement and look at the relationship between everyday social media practice and online civil society, public sphere(s), and collective actions.

Control-resistance dichotomy prioritizes state-society relations which looks at society as organizations of citizens and focus on citizen-organization interaction. Little attention is given to inter-citizen interactions on social media and how these interactions relate to civic engagement.

English-language literature on social media in China, though many of them are from Chinese scholars who either grew up in China or work in China but had overseas academic experience or background, has two characteristics. One is the pre-requisite normative stand of Western theorizations of democracy, contested and plural in details but consensual as an end and criteria to assess social media and social change in China. The other is, related to the former, the Western-centric standpoint which applies uncritically and unreflectively Western paradigms and arguments to China as a different social settings and historical realities (Guan, 2019). For the former, I agree with Sen (1999) who argues that democracy is universally accepted as valuable, though democracy as form of governance is not equally universal. According to Sen, this is because of democracy's value in providing political participation and freedom, political incentives to keep government responsible and accountable, and formation of values (ibid). What democracy provides is as contested as the conceptualization of what democracy is. But Sen's distinction between democracy as a universal value and democracy as form of governance broadens the horizon of dialogue between the normative stand of Western theorization of democracy and local conditions of a society, for example, China. English-language literature on social media in China examines if and how Chinese social media users conduct political participation and/or supervise the government, hence the online civil society and public space arguments. I look at, instead, if, how,

and why daily participation in online assemblages relates to the above democratic practices. I conceptualize democracy, in addition to democracy as political system and ideal, as majority participation practices in issues of collective concern or in making issues to be of collective concern. If and how the practice of civic virtue is related to this conceptualization of democracy is the focus of this research. For the second, I argue that civic virtue is a bridging concept between the West and China because virtue is universal to all cultures. Citizenship as a legal status may be a paradigm with Western origin but civic virtue as virtue of membership is universal to all cultures. I argue that civic virtue as virtue of membership in society and civic virtue as virtue of citizens are integrated in social media everyday practices. And this research is to unpack such integration in the analytical chapters.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction

In this research, I use “media as practice” theory as my theoretical framework because its alignment with practice theory resonates with my intention to find out what people do on and with social media instead of only looking at the content people generate on social media. Media as practice was proposed by Nick Couldry in 2004 and developed in his 2012 book based on practice theory as a social theory. He applies practice theory to media studies, mostly from an audience studies standpoint. This chapter begins with a brief introduction of practice theory which informs media as practice theory and explains why it fits my research question and how media as practice theory frames my project. I first introduce key proposals of practice theory, then move to how practice theory informs media studies. After that I explain media as practice theory and how it frames my research. In the end, I introduce briefly ANT and technology as practice theory as supplementary theoretical frameworks.

3.2 On Practice Theory

Practice theory points to an ontology to examine social life as practices (Miettinen et al, 2009). It differs from the ontologies of looking at society and social life from individual’s perspective, or nonindividual or totality perspective (Schatzki, 1997; 2003). The characteristic of social life, according to practice theory lens, is that it is an ongoing production and emerges through people’s recurrent actions (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011: 1240). Practice theory, therefore, focuses firmly in empirical research, or “ethnographic in its sensibility” (Miettinen et al, 2009: 1312). And the empirical sets its stronghold in everyday life. Reckwitz (2002) argues that the interest in ‘everyday’ and ‘life-world’ loosely united as diverse theorists as Bourdieu, Giddens, Foucault, Latour and so on around the practice theory. This echoes the argument of Schatzki (1996) that one dimension of practice theory is that practice theory is a loose term to cover different approaches to practice. Practice is understood, according to Miettinen et al, “as something that people do in ‘real’

or everyday life” so that “[t]he doings of everyday life are seen as constituting a foundation for social order and institutions” (2009: 1312).

The concept of practice, the simplest conceptualization as organized nexus of activities (Schatzki, 1996), is argued to call attention to transcend academic arbitrarily made “levels” of studies and conceptualizations: what individuals do and say as micro level; routines as meso level; and institutions as macro levels, and to integrate some layers as well: local and global; unique and culturally shared; here and now as well as historically constituted and path-dependent (Miettinen et al, 2009: 1309-1310). In one word, practice is conceived as a thread to tie some previously separated and dichotomized conceptualizations together, particularly those separations of different scale of social life and temporal and spatial separations of social life. Practice theory calls attentions to see the connections, no matter how far and complicated they are, between components of social life since it is argued that everyday actions are consequential, practices defy dualism, and relationality of mutual constitution exists between components of social life (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011: 1241-1242).

Practice theory sees the social as nexus of practices (Schatzki, 1997; 2003) and therefore conceptualizes the social as covering all human activities, including the civic, the political, the cultural, the economic, the technological, etc. Practices then, are not only elements of social world, but also unit of analysis for researching the social world (Burchell et al, 2020). Practice theory not only provides ontology to understand the social, but also provides ontology to study the social.

Besides, practices are argued to have an inherently social character. “To undertake a practice is to engage with something shared, whether that is in engagement with others or in action toward a type of conduct that can be practically understood” (Burchell et al, 2020: 2777). The social in the “social character” contrasts with the above broadest sense of the social as nexus of practices. The social in the narrow sense refers to “between people” or “with people.”

What is special with practice theory as a social theory is its using practice as an ontological tool to examine the social as well as using practice as a unit of analysis (Burchell et al, 2020).

3.3 Practice Theory and Studying Media

The application of practice theory to the study of media suggests that the perspective and focus of study are on practices, instead of structures, systems, individuals, or interactions (Postill, 2010: 1). And I add one more word to this suggestion: alone. Using practice theory to study media does not look at any one of the above-mentioned perspectives alone. Instead, practices tie them altogether. How practices tie them together, though, is not fully theorized by far.

Postill suggests that practice theory offers new ways to address central questions in media studies such as media in everyday life (2010: 12). “New ways,” according to Postill’s review of research on media conducted with practice theory, are from the “diverse theoretical contributions from philosophy, social theory, empirical studies of social interaction, and the social studies of science” (Lunt, 2020: 2947) who loosely form practice approach (Postill, 2010: 6). The diversity of practice theorists offers richness for the application of practice theory into media studies (Lunt, 2020: 2952).

Applications of practice theory into media studies flourish in recent years and many of them demonstrate creativity in researching media-related studies with nexus of practices perspective. Woodstock studies resistance of using media, for example, and argues that initially appearing as individual, idiosyncratic resisting acts “constitute a social critique of media use” when their practices considered collectively (2020: 1984). A practice theory perspective on news generates the argument of news as relational social practice, highlighting the nexus of practices between news production, consumption and communication (Ostertag, 2020).

Practice theory is found particularly useful for providing new angles to the examination of Internet and social media practices in two ways: the study *on* and *with* Internet and social media; and the study of Internet and social media in everyday uses. For example, Internet is argued to be used by people to structure and perform their daily life in terms of professional, private, and public life, that is, to organize their constellations of everyday practices, by collapsing temporal and spatial confines of each constellation of practices (Pagh, 2020). Research usually focuses on the collapse of

contexts between public and private and online-offline on Internet and social media. Pagh's research furthers the integration of previously perceived separated practices by anchoring Internet as the pivot to structure daily life in this digital world.

There are also valuable critical voices on the application of practice theory into media studies. Bakardjieva (2020) argues that practice has been the research focus for several well-known traditions in Media Studies which also gains insights and dynamics from practice theorists like Bourdieu, but differently from practice theory proponents. She (ibid) argues for the usefulness of concepts like agency in Media Studies that the practice theory claims to dissolve into practice and she invites practice theory to make dialogue with other traditions in Media Studies. I agree with this critique for its highlight of the diverse range of academic directions and traditions loosely under the umbrella of the practice theory and its proposal to introduce these diversities into the studies of media. I echo this critique by introducing two members of the practice theory "family," ANT and technology as social practice theories as supplement to media as practice theory.

3.4 Media as Practice Theory

Media as practice theory is an approach, or in Couldry's word, a paradigm: "It treats media as the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media" (Couldry, 2012: 117), in contrast to media considered as objects, texts, apparatuses of perception or production processes (Couldry, 2012: 35). In terms of practice, Couldry offers three interconnected definitions. One informally explains practice as "something human beings do...a form of action" (Couldry, 2012: 33). This is about activity as purposeful. The other explains practice as a "routinized type of behaviour...: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities" (Couldry, 2012. 40) It is here we see resonances with notions of banality and mundanity. The third accounts for knowledge as "a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (ibid). This is about everyday common sense as well as the way emotions and intentions may shape knowledge. A definition summarizes the above and goes that "Practices are the embodied sets of activities that humans perform with varying degrees of regularity, competence, and flair" (Postill, 2010: 1). These

are important in helping me understand and measure participation in online assemblages: how such practices become purposeful and mundane and how interactions in online assemblages demonstrate practices of civic virtues.

By applying practice theory into media studies, Couldry argues that media studies can "study the whole range of practices that are oriented towards media and the role of media in ordering other practices in the social world" (2012, 115). Media as practice theory, Couldry argues, is primarily about open questions like: What are people *doing* with media in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts? (2004: 119) "What types of things do people do in relation to media? What types of things do people say in relation to media?" (2004: 121). He then combines all the above questions into one: "What do people do /say / think /believe in relation to media?" (2012: 40).

Couldry's questions, together with his media as practice perspective, certainly open a window for social media studies. I find this theory particularly helpful for my project to clarify four aspects: objects of study; range of study; tools for study; and normative stand for data conceptualization and theorization. But media as practice theory has its limitations for my research as well. I will explain them one by one.

3.4.1 Objects of Study

That Couldry argues that media as practice theory decentres media in media studies (2004; 2012) is meanwhile a shift to centre people and their interaction with media in social context. Relations and interactions between people, media, and context become the object of study instead of any one of them alone. This fits the examination of "social" media very well and fits the study of online assemblages particularly well. Online assemblages are made of collective of people with collective efforts to maintain their being and they are primarily sites of the social. The goal of my research is to unpack how civic virtues are practiced in the social which is composed of several layers: the social as interactions between people in online assemblages as specific settings; the social of the social context in which people interact in online assemblages, or the social as interactions between people, their immediate context, and the media; and the social of the bigger social context in which people take part in online assemblage interaction. The social becomes an integral part of practices to be examined. This echoes what Couldry argues:

practice is social (2012: 33). The social and the civic and their relations in different contexts, or circumstances and settings, become a major object of study for my research. And the social here refers to the narrow sense instead of the broadest sense distinguished above.

To find out what people do on and with social media is exactly what I want to do. Media as practice theory focuses on the whole process of media communication, not just the media or the content, which have been frequently seen in some social media research. Meanwhile, it allows researchers to “ask people open questions about what people are doing and how they categorize what they are doing”, thus avoiding any disciplinary or other preconceptions that would automatically read their actions (Couldry, 2010:125). As mentioned earlier, there are arguments that Internet and social media bring context collapse practices (Pagh, 2020). The relations between the social and the civic in such context collapse practices are part of my object of study.

It is the feature of social media that people as users shuttle between multiple roles as producers, senders, receivers, consumers of social media communication or take some of them all at once. With media as practice theory’s focus on what people do with media in context, the “shuttling” practice and its significance are also object of study. This contextual view is especially missing in social media content studies which are widely seen in English-language literature on social media in China. Or they may take the context of content as a whole into consideration but ignore the context of specific act of individual users, or local experience (Couldry, 2012: 7). As Couldry tries to prove, audience studies have shown again and again the individuality of media use (2004; 2012). Moreover, media as practice theory centres not only on people, but also on their social relations (Couldry, 2012: 39). In this way, individual acts of media use are understood not only in relation to its context, but also to other individuals and it is the interactions between individualities, or “the orientation to others” (Couldry, 2012: 34), that are picked up and enabled by social media and make social media *social*. As Couldry argues, “[p]ractices are not bundles of individual idiosyncrasies; they are social constructions that carry with them a whole world of capacities, constraints and power” (2012: 34).

Media as practice theory helps build a channel between media uses and larger social phenomena, but not through media effect lens (Couldry, 2004; 2012). This is the most useful inspiration I get from the theory. My interest is in how to conceptualize everyday civic practices coming along with the

prevalence of uses of social media across age, educational, regional and other categorizational social groups, media as practice theory provides a powerful lens. This research looks at practices in online assemblages as an anchor to seek the routes of connections between social media uses and civic practices. How civic significance arises from assembling of individual users, their social interactions, aggregates of content generated by individuals into forms of assemblages, flow of people and aggregated content in different assemblages, and influence of such flow on forming collective voice or action and on plural voices etc. If and how social media practices and civic practices become nexus of practices is part of the object of study.

3.4.2 Range of Study

Media as practice theory focuses its research locus on everyday using of media. Practice theory, as Couldry argues, looks at everyday life as practice (2012: 37) and it is the everyday routines that organize themselves into logic which generates conditions for practice (Couldry, 2012: 39). Practice is concerned with regularity and it is “specific regularities in our actions related to media and the regularities to context and resource that make certain types of media-related actions possible or impossible, likely or unlikely” (Couldry, 2012: 33). Thus, my project is about finding regularities of associating practice in online assemblages, while not just the “chance or incidental occurrences” (Couldry, 2012: 33) which are anchor of some social media research like social media and social movement (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Rane and Salem, 2012; to name a few); and political use of social media studies since many of them use case studies (Jiang, 2014; Liu, 2015; Tai, 2015; Wu and Yang, 2015; Zheng and Yu, 2016k; Dong et al, 2017). The focus on daily life participation in social media assemblages allows me to study more grassroots practice of social media, the regularities of which may make social changes likely or unlikely.

But this does not mean that I leave incidents out of my research. I do not intentionally look for incidents as focus of my object of study but when incidents are found in practices, they are studied in comparisons with routine practices.

3.4.3 Tools of Study

Based on media as practice theory, some useful concepts have already been developed which can be very useful in framing detailed research questions and interview questions. Among others, I think the following concepts are most useful.

Firstly, action versus practice. Action is contextual, contingent, and transient local act; while practice is regularity of act, or patterns of repeated act (Couldry, 2004; 2012). This distinction provides strong theoretical support to study everyday uses of social media, participating in online assemblages in my case, by relating acts to practices. The way of such relating, as Couldry suggests, is "actions are linked into a practice not just by explicit understandings, but also by being governed by common rules and by sharing the same reference-point of certain ends, projects and beliefs" (2012: 121). During such process, elements (Shove et al, 2012) of associating practice will emerge and therefore translations of practices or nexus of practices emerge. With media as practice theoretical framework, my project looks at the process of pattern emerging from examination of individual's daily act of media use. Yet, it is not clear if the practice is about individual's patterned act or patterned acts of collectives of individuals. My focus is on the latter though.

Secondly, dispersed practice and integrative practice, or "practice widely dispersed among different sectors of social life" (Scharzki, 1996: 91) and "more complex practices found in and constitutive of particular domains of social life" (ibid: 98). I use participation in civic virtues as dispersed practice and online assemblage participation as integrative practice on social media to examine the route of the links between the two. Shove et al. (2012) develop several pairs of concepts to capture relations between practices via applications of practice theory, that is, developing tools from the "practice" of applying the theory. I bear the same attempt in my research.

Thirdly, regularity of action versus chance or incidental occurrences. This is a very useful clarification of concepts which helps demarcate the range of my research as argued above. In Couldry's point of view, media as practice theory concentrates on regularities of practices. I argue that incidental

occurrences are equally important since they contrast with regularities and without such contrast, the meanings of both are not highlighted enough.

As will be seen in the methodology chapter, media as practice theory not only provides useful tools to frame my research, it also points to the methods of researching practices by exploring “what people say and do.” Besides, media as practice theory guides the conduct of fieldwork and data analysis. It is leaned on in many decision-making moments in my research.

3.4.4 Limitations of Media as Practice Theory

Media as practice theory, Miettinen et al argue, emphasizes too much of the habituality of practices and therefore is in a difficult position to “make sense of the change of human practices” (2012: 346). This criticism is found valid in Couldry’s media as practice theory as well since he argues that one of the advantages of media as practice theory is practice is concerned with regularities of actions (2012: 33). Shove et al (2012) also argue that practice theories have untapped potentials for understanding change and they strive to offer concept tools to research changes with practice theories. Change is a label inseparable with social media, but its position in practice and its relations with routine are not fully revealed in media as practice theory. Though Couldry uses “dynamic of change” to interpret anchoring practice, that is, the practice whose change will automatically cause changes of other practices (2004: 112), he basically does not cover the issue of change in his media as practice theory.

With this limitation in mind, my examination of the everyday participation of online assemblages on social media not only look at routines and patterns, but also look at the breaking of routines and patterns, the relationship between routines and the breaking of routines, and the meaning of “collective” breaking of routines.

Bakardjieva criticizes media as practice as a “misnomer” since media as a material is only a component of practice (2020: 2938). Her criticism is weak since she obviously ignores content and communication that media as material convey. Her criticism is particularly weak in the face of Internet and social media on which many people live their lives. Yet, her criticism indirectly illuminates a limitation of media as practice theory: it imports practice theory into the study of media as a perspective and that is all. How

is media as practice different from other field as practice is not clearly developed. As a result, there is no media-specific concept tools except media-related and media-oriented (Couldry, 2004; 2012).

The lack of conceptual tools means that media as practice theory is more open-ended and ongoing than other mature theories. For example, Mattoni (2020) develops the media-in-practices approach by using media as practice theory. This suggests that I have more flexibility and freedom in applying it into my project but it also suggests that I have less firm ground to stand on.

A limitation for practice theory in general is that it pays little attention to ethics. It seems that practice legitimizes itself. Two arguments indicate that ethics should be concerned in practice theory. One is the argument of online uncivil society, or uncivil interactions, co-evolving with civic discourses in China's social media (Jiang, 2016). The other is Vallor's proposal of specific technomoral virtues, or virtues to be cultivated collectively for a good life, for the emergence of social media technology which mediate and transform all sorts of human relationship (2016: 159). There are values, philosophies, and ideologies behind deciding what is civil and what is uncivil as well as what is good life. Practices theory needs to interact with normative concepts for mutual benefit. I combine media as theory with the normative concept of civic virtue.

3.5 ANT and Technologies as Social Practice Theory

Specific for my project, media as practice theory is useful to distinguish social media technological affordances from the practices of using such affordances. Yet, the theory is not clear enough to illustrate how technological affordances are used in practices and I argue that two components of the practice theory, ANT and the technologies as social practice theory (Suchman, 1999), are necessary as useful supplements to media as practice theory in this respect. ANT is useful in helping me taking social media technological affordances and respondents' uses of such technological affordances as equally important components of social media practices. It helps framing the research questions and answering research questions without being stuck in the trap of technological determinism.

Technologies as social practice, on the other hand, connects social media with social media uses.

Though mainly based on social studies of science and technologies in workplace, Suchman's (1999) multi ethnographic studies suggest that technology uses are integrated into specific context in everyday experience. This perspective provides an angle to look into the discourses that the digital and Internet media are enabling technological affordances (boyd, 2014), which becomes context in social media practice. It also helps overcome the dichotomy between the technological versus the social in media as practice theory when Couldry mentions "other approaches that privilege software" in contrast to his social theory of media (2012: 37). A social media practice is made up of multiple elements and the technological affordances are only one of them. Besides, it also provides a "whole media" possibility which is vital to media as practice theory: What keeps traditional media, digital media and all other media together in one family is that they are all stages of media technological development, which facilitates different type of mediated communication in different ways. And their uses are part of social practice that overlaps with media as practice.

My project is anchored by the question "What do people do and say in relation to social media?" My hope is that this question enables me to examine in detail what people do on and with social media online assemblages, what they say and think about their participation, and how regularities and patterns could be detected from their action and discourse, and then how these media-related practice informs media-oriented practice, that is, the cultivation of their civic virtues by such participating activities. Therefore, the focus of my project is on people's actions on social media, their actions with social media, and their discourse about social media as well. And all of those are examined in a daily context. Since using media as practice theory is to find out "what are people doing that is related to media?" (Couldry, 2012: 35), to answer the question, the best and most straightforward way is to ask and observe people. Therefore, ethnography is my methodology. So interviewing and participant observation are used as triangulation of what people do, say, and are observed as what they do and say.

By using media as practice theory, my research connects several foci of current studies on social media. Firstly, my research studies a “location” different from previous studies on social media content; sites and platforms; actors like individual and organizations; phenomena and fields like politics and social movements; and events. My research looks at a practice, the daily conduct of online users, through which a nexus of practices related to it are distinguished. This “location” helps “network” some of the previously mentioned locations since nexus of practices address multiple locations. I argue that the practice perspective allows a more multidimensional examination of social media and civic and political participation than other “locations” of studies.

Channelling social media practice to civic and political participation is a second connection of existing work. Previous research either makes simple causal links by using surveys (Mou et al., 2013; Shi, 2013; Xie et al, 2017; Ye et al, 2017), or argue the positive relationship between social media uses and behavioural, practical, and phenomenal changes using case studies. A look at everyday uses of social media from practice perspective avoids both straightforward jumping from uses to their effects and the particularities of social media uses by, for example, organizations, elites, professionals, etc. for civic and political purposes. Instead, it investigates the long or short rippling of nexus of practices related to social media from everyday social practice to civic and political practices that emerge during the progress of investigation and then presents the route. In other words, such perspective helps uncover both the range (complexity) and depth (route) of social media and civic and political participation.

My research aims to combine an empirical social media study with a social media as practice approach. It contributes to studies of social media by providing empirical and culture-sensitive investigations from little applied practice perspective. Specifically, I hope that my research will contribute to the attempt to theorize China’s social media using a wider range of resources than existing and Western-centric approaches.

Chapter 4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The key question arising from media as practice theory “What do people do and say about what they do on social media” leads me to use online ethnography as the methodology of this research. I use online interviews and participant observations to generate data and then use thematic analysis to interpret data. In these processes, I try to be open, reflective, iterative, accountable, and ethical. These principles are characteristics not only of online ethnography and thematic analysis, but also of media as practice theory (Couldry, 2004). The theoretical framework and ethical concern shape my methodology and frame my fieldwork and data analysis. They inform me what to do and how; where to generate data and how; how to perceive data for emerged themes. In the following sections I unpack how these two inform every step and aspect of my research. After I reflect how I tried to conduct an ethical social media research, I specify ethical concerns and principles in the last section.

4.2 Media as Practice Theory and Conducting Fieldwork

Media as practice theory highlights the open-endedness of practices related to media uses (Couldry, 2004: 117) and the aims of research as being “as open as possible in analysing what practices are out there” (Couldry, 2004: 121). These principles have significant methodological implications on my conceptualization of and planning for fieldwork: I do not have pre-assumptions of what I am going to find out. Neither did I devise research methods to orient my respondents in any way related to pre-assumptions. Nor did I conceptualize and interpret data in a pre-assumed way. Instead, I went to the fieldwork without any pre-assumptions. I kept as open-minded and sensitive as I could to access practices. This echoes ANT, an important contributor to practice theory, whose proponents argue “let the subject of study speak for themselves” rather than to be classified, and defined by the researcher beforehand (Latour, 1999; 2005).

The open-endedness of practice and research on practice then informed another methodological consideration: inventive methods. That is, “method must rather be made specific and relevant to the problem. In short, inventive methods are ways to introduce answerability into a problem” (Lury and

Wakeford, 2012: 3). The “problem,” however, was not predicted in open-ended research. Problems, one after another, emerged as the fieldwork rolled on. For example, wording of invitation messages for recruiting respondents; Chinese translations of English concepts like civic virtue; Chinese counterpart for the term online assemblage; keeping appropriate dynamic of contact with each respondent according to her preference, etc. Fieldwork is a problem-solving process. The methodological preparedness of using inventive methods allowed me to be creative and adaptive in using chosen research methods, to be detailed in the following. The value of such methodology is to create nuanced research methods and to use existing research methods creatively in adaptation to individual respondents instead of simply applying or using existing research methods indiscriminately to every respondent. This methodology develops individual respondent-tailored nuanced research methods.

4.2.1 Research Question and the Choice of Methods

This research looks at the link between uses of social media online assemblages and the many “sharing, participating, and networking” arguments of the social media (Loader and Mercea, 2012; Trottier, 2012; Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Hinton and Hjorth 2013; Milan, 2013; Tierney, 2013; Evans, 2015; Highfield, 2016). The link, I argue, is civic virtue. The research question naturally arises as “Does online assemblage participation have anything to do with civic virtue?” To answer this question, media as practice theory directs the focus of research attention naturally to “What people do and say” (Couldry, 2004) in relation to online assemblages. Though Couldry’s (2004) theorization of media as practice is primarily based on television or broadcasting media, his suggestions to divert attention from media text, political economy of media production, audience studies on media consumption and instead to focus on people and their individual practices fit social media research very well. Social media is designed to be semi-finished product, which are their technological affordances, the other half is users’ DIY (do it yourself) on it. Research on what people do, or social media content alone then, misses the circumstance, motivations, behaviours and individualities when people use social media as practices. Research on people, on the other hand, has a problem that is reflected in the following situation. In an anthropologist’s ethnography of social media use by rural Chinese, McDonald states he seeks to understand his subjects’ online activities in the context of their offline lives (2016: 2). He obviously takes the two apart, as other ethnographers do in their study of social media (Zhang,

2014; Wang, 2016). Media as practice bypasses the online and offline dichotomy since it anchors on practices of people, the meeting point of the online and offline. With the guidance of media as practice theory, people and the content they produce are equally important to answer my research question. I then needed to find people, to find out where they are, what they do, and what they say about what they do. Media as practice theory allowed me to combine motivations, behaviours, circumstances, and outcomes of online assemblage participation. To achieve this, online ethnography was used as the methodology to generate and collect data.

4.2.2 Online Ethnography

There are many terms for doing ethnography on and about the Internet, and more broadly, the digital technology. They reflect the certain aspect of the Internet technology and its challenge for doing ethnography, for example, virtuality of ethnographic sites (Hine, 2000); networked organization of subjects (Howard, 2002); connective approach in doing ethnography on connective sites (Hine, 2007); cyberethnography (James and Busher, 2009); observation of textual content in netnography (Kozinets, 2010); digital environment of ethnography (Pink et al, 2016; Hjorth et al, eds. 2017); to name some. And some highlight the strategy in doing ethnography, such as mobile ethnography (Hine, 2011). Above scholarship reveals practices of inventiveness and adaptiveness in doing Internet related ethnography. I try to be methodologically inventive and adaptive in my ethnographic practice too.

I think ethnography is the best methodology to answer my research questions not only because of its "holistic understanding" (Hine, 2015: 2) and immersion into real life (Machin, 2002), but also because it is "more than being any specific set of procedures" but "a way of thinking about human behaviour" (Machin, 2002: 17), resonating with media as practice theory. Ethnographic approach enabled me to be sensitive in intentions, motivations, and considerations behind the acts and silence on which the generation of content on social media is based. It enabled me key insights into examining the interaction between the social and the civic in the following chapters. For example, I discuss the civic significances of social acts in online assemblages such as liking and commenting in Chapter 7 and theorize them as collective virtue. I would not necessarily have otherwise noted them had I used alternative methods. Indeed, my ethnographic approach enabled subtle changes so that such significances become visible. In this project, it provides a way of thinking about online assemblage

participation. This way emphasizes understanding users' assemblage participation in its context and seeking meaning both from users' own accounts and my observations. As Hine puts it, it is "to understand what is there on its own terms" (2017: 316). I also agree with Madianou's claim that "Ethnography does not assume what is social media, but rather highlight its social uses according to context" (Madianou, 2015: 2). This claim resonates with my intention to examine social media in China's context illustrated in Chapter 1. In this perspective, technological affordances of social media enable and facilitate this research, to be detailed in the sites section.

However, ethnography is not free from ontological opponents. I agree with the argument of interpretative ethnography (Thornham, 2011) since my particular project is interpretive application of the general "rules" of ethnography piled up by previous particular ethnographic projects, including those mentioned above. "Interpretative" is based on both an understanding of consensual general rules and an understanding of the particular conditions of my project as well as an adaptive and creative application of general rules to particular conditions. I call this adaptive ethnography. This project was constructed and conditioned by many things both controllable and uncontrollable. I kept these conditions in good record and reflected on their impact on the findings of my project.

One adaptation is to decide "where to do ethnography and how" for doing ethnography on the online. This is partly due to the conflicts emerged from applying ethnography from anthropological traditions to the online, resulting in conceptualizations of the online that bring many uncertainties—on the "authenticity and validity" of online identity, on "division" between online virtual world and offline real world, on the "effect" of virtual world on real world behaviour and vice versa, and bringing the elusiveness of ethnographic sites. This project focuses on practice as the construct of my online ethnographic work. That is, I mainly used ethnographic methodologies which are practice-centred (as compared with traditional place-based ethnography and multi-sited ethnography and relationship-based and trace-sought ethnography in studying the internet) to conduct my field work. I used media as practice theory to construct a priori what I was to look at, where I went, to whom I went, what I observed and asked, and how I connected the data. Practice-centred means that I went where the practice occurred, meeting and choosing my respondents there, and immersing myself there as they are the "sites" of my fieldwork. It also means that I looked at components of practices such as actors, acts, circumstances, context,

technological affordances of social media platforms, perceptions, consequences, patterns, routines, and clusters of practices. Thus, my practice-centred ethnography followed people on multi sites, covered their relations and traces, and observed what they did and said. In this case, I immersed myself in settings where online assemblage participation occurs.

Another adaptation is using social media to conduct a social media research. I both used social media as tools to conduct research and researched content people produce on social media platforms. One methodological implication of such arrangement is the tool of communication becomes the site of ethnography, to be explored in the sites section. This aspect of online ethnography has not been thoroughly reflected upon in academic literature.

4.2.3 A Reflective Fieldwork

My fieldwork started in May 2018 when I passed the University's ethical review. I gradually recruited 21 respondents from two major public social media platforms, Douban⁴ and Zhihu⁵, and intermediary recommendations. Respondents scattered in different regions in China, as table 4.1 shows. They were all ordinary social media users in the sense that none of them was influential or well-known, either offline or on any social media platforms. The online assemblages in which they participated across social media platforms and their social media profiles on each platform, including the so-called private social media platforms WeChat and QQ⁶ in addition to public platforms like Douban, Zhihu, Baidu Tieba⁷ and Weibo, were the major sites that I conducted online observation without participation. I approximately spent several hundred hours on observations and interviews. And I wrote 262 fieldnotes from May 2018 to March 2020, organized according to date. Fieldnotes on descriptions and summaries of observations and interviews as well as reflections on lessons became an important part of data for analysis. I shifted attention from observation and interviews to data analysis since February 2019 while the observations and interviews were still going on, at

⁴ A well-know Chinese forum-style social media platforms.

⁵ A well-known Quora-style social media platform.

⁶ Second largest WhatsApp-style social media platforms.

⁷ A popular forum-style social media platform which is a branch of the famous search engine Baidu in China.

less frequency though. I stopped quoting data from March 2020 because I outlined all empirical chapters by then.

Table 4.1 Respondents Information

Respondents	Recruitment	Gender	Age Group	Region
Annie	Douban	Female	Thirties	Western
Ban	Zhihu	Female	Thirties	Southern
Bo	Intermediary	Male	Twenties	Western
Chuan	Intermediary	Female	Twenties	Eastern
Ci	Intermediary	Male	Twenties	Southern
Dai	Douban	Female	Thirties	Central
Dui	Zhihu	Female	Twenties	Central
Fa	Douban	Female	Twenties	Eastern
Gong	Douban	Female	Thirties	Eastern
Hu	Douban	Female	Forties	Western
Ji	Intermediary	Male	Twenties	Southern
Kang	Intermediary	Female	Fifties	Western
Ma	Zhihu	Male	Thirties	Central
Nong	Zhihu	Female	Twenties	Central
Qing	Douban	Female	Forties	Northern
Shu	Douban	Male	Forties	Eastern
Tou	Douban	Male	Thirties	Northern
Wai	Intermediary	Male	Seventies	Northern
Xin	Zhihu	Female	Thirties	Southern
Xuan	Intermediary	Female	Seventies	Southern
Yu	Douban	Male	Forties	Eastern

My data generation and collection were from fieldwork but my fieldwork was not purely data generation and collection but involving literature and theoretical reading as well. I have gone through a reflective fieldwork process. Reflection was not only involved in skills to generate and collect

data, for example, preparing interview questions, deciding interview themes and major topics, applying interview techniques, summarizing after each interview and taking lessons into account in next interviews, making decisions on selections of observation sites and movement between sites of observation, deciding content of observations, but also in the directions of the fieldwork, for example, where and how to get the next respondent, what to ask in the next interview, how interviews and observations from one respondent inspired interviews and observations of another respondent or the other respondents, and so on. In one word, reflections were the stepping stones for this iterative research.

Readings on theoretical frameworks, concept, methodologies, and methods accompanied the fieldwork, or the conduct of interviews and observations. The fieldwork was done by blending reading, reflecting, and conducting. The influence of such reflective fieldwork on my findings is that data generation and collection were layered, gradually extended and intensified, and became rich both in depth and width.

The following sections are reflective descriptions of my fieldwork. Though sampling, selection of observation sites, observations, interviewing, and taking fieldnotes are presented in a linear way, they are an organic and coherent whole. Besides, the conducting of fieldwork was messy, chaotic, unpredictable, and unordered. For writing's sake, I must cut them into sections and make them neat and tidy.

4.2.4 Sampling

This research used convenience sampling and snowballing sampling. Convenience sampling was used in the initial stage, or ice-breaking stage of fieldwork. After that, I followed respondents, going where they went, and recruited them where they were. This is not just snowballing in the sense of one recommending another. This is also snowballing of respondents' sites of practices. The reason for this inventive snowballing is ethical concern: to protect respondents' anonymity and privacy, I did not need them to recommend fellow members. After I was led to the group where they were, I could invite potential respondents myself.

I chose to start sampling in a Douban calligraphy group that I registered two years before the fieldwork out of personal interest at improving my Chinese handwriting. Soon after registry I stopped going to the group because I found daily practicing boring. Since this project did not aim at any specific kind of social media platform, e.g., political forum (Yang, 2003); or specific topic,

e.g., public topic like environmental protection (Sun et al, 2018); or any specific participation like political participation (Wang and Shi, 2018; Xu et al, 2018) and civic engagement (Ye et al, 2018); or any specific identity group like migrant workers (Wang, 2016) or specific economic regions like rural areas (McDonald, 2016), I argue this Douban calligraphy group is average enough to recruit ordinary social media users from whom I want to see if civic virtue plays a role in their participation in online assemblages. This research design is related to two conceptualizations. One is the conceptualization of people's participation in multiple online assemblages, similar to polymedia which highlights users' initiatives to meet different communicative needs on different social media platforms (Madianou and Miller, 2013). What I add here is that people not only use social media cross platforms, they also use different assemblages on the same platform. Therefore, as long as I found respondents, there would always be opportunities for me to find out and observe other online assemblages and/or social media platforms that they used. And I could recruit respondents there. The other is the conceptualization of civic virtue, which is arguably cultivated by associational life (Tocqueville, 2002), based on social activities in organizations. I therefore conceptualize civic virtue as related to social interactions in online assemblages which are collectives of people. I conceptualize civic virtue as not only related to civic actions (Lichterman and Eliasoph, 2014) but also to social collectives of people and collective efforts to maintain such collectives. In other words, I conceptualize civic virtue as related to social collectives of people instead of only related to specific collectives of people in terms of aims, identities, topics, locations and so on.

Therefore, I avoid any possible specific influence from specific online assemblages on my findings. Though any assemblage will have specific influence on my findings, I prefer a mediocre assemblage which may have mediocre influence instead of political-inclined or civic-inclined influence. Besides, with multiple online assemblages participation, the order to accessing respondents' multiple assemblages in different social media platforms may influence the layering of data in this iterative and reflective research and therefore influence my findings. This kind of influence is unavoidable though.

In another word, selection bias is unavoidable. I mitigate selection bias by recruiting on China's most popular social media platforms and by recruiting from intermediaries. I told intermediaries to recommend someone who was available instead of active or veteran users of social media. However, there

is a possibility that those respondents who accepted my recruitment invitations might be more civically virtuous than those people who did not respond to my recruitment invitations. This possibility is partly falsified by the fact that several respondents who accepted my recruitment invitations accepted few interview invitations and were inactive in interviews.

To do an ethical social media research is to fully inform potential respondents and fully respect their free choices in participating in my project or not. Therefore, I updated my Douban profile with a description of who I am and what I'm doing. Many Douban users uploaded their pictures to their profile, had some markers about themselves in real life, and wrote diaries on their profiles, so my description in profile is not awkward.

Then I sent invitations by using one-on-one messaging between Douban users to randomly selected respondents from those who sent posts in May, 2018, when my fieldwork started. Since there were 20 to 30 posts every day, I sent to three selected respondents for four days and just got one reply that refused me. I then sent to ten selected respondents every day for six days until I got three respondents who agreed to participate in my project. I then stopped sending invitations anymore. Later on, I got one more respondent from calligraphy group and three respondents who were not from this assemblage. They contacted me after browsing my Douban profiles. Three months after my first recruitment, I followed one respondent to a Douban fans group and recruited two respondents there. I got nine respondents from Douban altogether. The recruitments I made at following respondents were snowball sampling not in the sense that respondent recommended respondent but respondent recommended online assemblages that they participated in. This is, I argue, creative use of snowball sampling.

After a week of ineffective online recruiting, I was worried and turned to intermediaries for help. When choosing intermediaries, I took the profiles of potential respondents to whom I sent invitations into account and turned to intermediaries whom I expected to recommend respondents that I was not sure if available in calligraphy group, that is, old age users and economically backward small city users. Using intermediaries increased the variety of respondents and gave me chances to access a wider range of social media users. I recruited three respondents from two intermediaries from who I asked for help. After a few months, some of my acquaintances heard about what I was doing and recommended respondents to me. I got four respondents from three intermediaries in this way. Three of the four respondents recommended three more respondents.

When I started to build contact with respondents and had some knowledge of their online assemblage platforms, I followed their “traces” in online assemblages on open social media platforms: Zhihu Baidu Tieba, and Tianya Forum⁸ to do online recruiting. However, I succeeded only on Zhihu. For Baidu Tieba, no one replied my invitation. On Tianya Forum, I failed audio verification at the registration. On Zhihu, I sent invitation similar to Douban invitation using the one-on-one messaging on Zhihu to randomly selected respondents. Gradually I recruited five respondents from Zhihu. I have 21 respondents in total.

I creatively used snowballing sampling method as argued before. Combined with convenience sampling with and without intermediaries, I found out that my respondents were mostly with college education background and living in urban areas. I did not ask them about their demographic information, I learned this from what I collected both from many times of chats with them and from their online traces. My respondents’ demographic similarities echo the findings of ethnographers on rural immigrant workers in small urban town (Wang, 2016) and rural China in small town (McDonald, 2016), the majority of respondents in both studies dominantly used the so-called private social media QQ and WeChat and very few of them heard of Weibo (Wang, 2016:) or use Weibo (McDonald, 2016), let alone less popular public social media platforms like Douban, Zhihu, Tianya Forum and Baidu Tieba. Ethical concerns stopped me from ice-breaking access to private social media QQ and WeChat which I accessed later since they became communication tools between me and most of my respondents which will be discussed later.

My use of sampling methods limited the demographic diversity of my respondents in terms of age group, socio-economic background, regional locations and so on. I am fully aware that this limited my findings and theorizations of the relationship between civic virtue and online assemblage participation in China.

An inventive method that I created in sampling is the respondent-tailored wording of invitation message. The importance of wording in ethnographic research has not been noticed in literature but I found it very important for online ethnography in my project. Firstly, invitation message was the most important device for me to recruit respondents in the initial stage of fieldwork because my profiles on Douban, Zhihu and Baidu Tieba were very simple,

⁸ A once-well known forum social media website which now has app.

since I seldom or never used them. Secondly, I realized that the wording of invitation messages should resonate with the online culture and the topic or theme of the assemblage as well, otherwise, it sounded rigid, odd, academic, and incompatible with respondent's online world. Thirdly, I learned about a randomly chosen potential respondent as much as I could before sending the invitation message: examining profiles and searching previous traces. I combined what I learned about potential respondents with what I hoped them to do in the invitation messages. The first few sentences of my invitation messages were person-tailored and the rest part introducing myself and my project were the same. I do not know how this inventive method influence my findings since the successful recruitment rates was very low. Only one recruited respondent told me that he accepted my invitation because he was moved by the sincerity I showed in doing my research. My wording impressed him this way.

The size of the sample is determined by two factors. One is the workload I had in keeping contact with respondents, interviewing them, and observing online assemblages where they were members of. Since interviewing was not once-for-all but continuous throughout the fieldwork, the workload was very heavy when the samples grew over 20. The other factor is that no new data emerged. That is, when I felt that more respondents would not bring new data, I stopped recruiting.

4.2.5 Sites, Entry, Exit

Practice-centred ethnography easily settles two of the most important issues for ethnographers: sites and entry. I went where my respondents were. Except for the initial fieldwork stage in which I recruited respondents by using convenience sampling, the online assemblages where I recruited became the sites, the ensuing sites were where my respondents led me. Yet, since most of my respondents used online assemblages in more than one social media platforms, my fieldwork covers multiple and even plural sites.

Plural sites mean that I did not simply observe multiple sites but those sites vary in terms of type of social media platforms: firstly, some are public social media platforms and some are called private social media platforms; secondly, sizes of sites: some online assemblages are huge ones with about 80,000 members whereas some have less than 30 members; thirdly, range of sites: some are open assemblages in which everyone can join by application with no approval needed while some are invite-only close assemblages. Some are only social media platforms where my respondents'

online assemblages are located (The respondents did not tell me which assemblages they were in or they were in transient assemblages); fourthly, modality of sites: most sites are textual but there is video social media and broadcasting social media as well; fifthly, uses of sites: most sites were used as “contextual” environment in which I sought to immerse in the respondents’ culture while some sites were used as data-generating sites as well.

One notable feature in terms of sites of my fieldwork is communication tools became the sites. In my invitation, I left my email address, my Chinese mobile numbers, my WeChat and QQ accounts (two so-called private but most popular social media platforms in China) when I sent invitation messages on Douban, Baidu Tieba, and Zhihu respectively. The purpose was to give the potential respondents multiple choices to decide their preferred means of contact and communication with me. Except one respondent who kept communicating with me throughout the fieldwork on the one-on-one messaging function of Douban, other respondents either chose to use WeChat and/or QQ in the first place or chose to move from one-on-one messaging function of Douban and Zhihu to WeChat or QQ. For the recommended respondents, I gave the intermediaries my email address, my Chinese mobile numbers, and my WeChat and QQ accounts. And all recommended respondents contacted me via WeChat. This echoed the finding that WeChat and QQ are the top two communication social media that Chinese use (CNNIC, 2020).

The methodological implications of the uses of WeChat and QQ as the communication tools are huge. Firstly, WeChat and QQ provided multi modalities of communication. I interviewed my respondents by texts, voice calls, and audio messages, according to my respondents’ situational choices. These devices of interview broadened range and extent of communication between my respondents and me, bringing rich and in-depth data. The interviews on Douban and Zhihu one-on-one messages though, were always asynchronous, text only, slow-paced with exchanges of a few sentences each day. My respondents checked WeChat and QQ updates much more frequently than checking Zhihu and Douban, which are basically not for instantaneous communication. Besides, the asynchronous temporality of social media (Baym, 2015) plus synchronous temporality gave my respondents more freedom and power to receive online interviews in their way—person-tailored interviews, tailored by them, not by me. Social media as interview device gives respondents more control on timing, pace,

rhythm, length of each interview and exit mechanism, adding more features to the person-tailored online interview. Several respondents did not reply me months after previous talks, then I knew this was their exit from the project. I argue giving respondents more power over their involvement in social media research is also a kind of ethical research.

WeChat and QQ as communication tools also pose questions. The biggest one is the timing of interviews, which is an ethical concern. I always elaborated on how to make my interview invitations as less intrusive as possible. Sometimes I interviewed them on the commenting section of their posts or reposts. Sometimes I sent them one-on-one interview questions right after they sent a post or repost. Sometimes I “imagined” their daily routine and chose the least intruding time to send carefully worded interview invitations. Inventive, adaptive and ethical online ethnography enabled person-tailored ethnography.

Secondly, WeChat and QQ became both communication tools and ethnographic sites. I unavoidably saw respondents’ posts, reposts, comments, and replies to comments on their WeChat and QQ updates. Respondents’ social media acquaintance assemblage practices therefore became part of my observations. The online interview tools became sites of participant observation. This extended my observational sites from public social media platforms to private social media platforms and hugely broadened the range of my research. However, this poses huge ethical challenge on researching private social media platforms, although WeChat and QQ counterpart Facebook has become a research field. I took this ethical challenge by taking vigorous measures at protecting the privacy of my respondents which will be detailed in the last section.

Thirdly, the perspective from ANT helps unpack the influence of communication tools becoming the communication sites. ANT argues that human, non-human—technological affordances of social media platforms in this case, and the artefacts, are equal actors in forming a collective of network with associations between each other (Callon, 1998; Latour, 1999; Law, 1999; Law and Hassard, 1999; Latour, 2005; Callon, 2006; Callon et al., 2007). In this perspective, I, my respondents, technological affordances like text messaging, audio messaging and audio calls on WeChat and QQ, and the content of communication between us on WeChat and QQ, are equal actors in a network. WeChat and QQ are not in a position stuck between as tools of communication or as sites of ethnography, but are actors making contributions to a network. My findings then reflect the

processes that each actor contributed to network constructing. My analysis of findings will reflect WeChat and QQ's contributions to my findings.

One concern with WeChat and QQ's role in my findings is if they are appropriate for my project that examines civic virtue since they are usually considered as personal social media platforms in contrast to microblogging and forum-style "public" social media platforms. As argued before, my conceptualization of civic virtue is the civic of the social. WeChat and QQ, as the most popular social media sites in China, are important sites of social interaction. Tu (2016) argues that WeChat is a platform where "state, market, and civil society merge and compete". My findings echo the dynamic social and civic talks on WeChat.

Entry is rather easy in social media platforms. For most social media platforms, registration is required, and registration is open to any applicants. For open and public online assemblages, entry is as easy as registry. For invite-only groups on WeChat and QQ, I entered five assemblages following the traces of my respondents. They are all strangers assemblages. Four of them were hosted by my respondents and I was invited by the respondents. The fifth one was hosted by a We-media team on Sina Weibo and I was invited by the host. Among these assemblages, two have more than 300 members. The other three have around 30 members.

An ethical concern is raised here about sending consent forms. I sent information sheets and consent forms to individually recruited respondents as soon as they agreed to participate in my project. I sent them the electronic version and asked them to send back consent using text message. For open assemblages on public social media platforms, I did not send consent forms to non-respondent members. I did the same in big close assemblages. For small close assemblages, I found it was impractical to send consent forms. In the two small WeChat chat groups hosted by one respondent, there were very few interactions between members. They were assemblages of sharing reposted articles. When there were interactions, they were simple comments like "good article" or festival greetings. They were not assemblages for talks. No much authentic user-generated content was seen in these assemblages. Therefore, I did not think it is necessary to send consent forms. For the third small WeChat assemblages I observed, whose host was my respondent and invited me in, I did not send consent form because the host introduced me and I said something about my research too. No one made any comment about my research and the members quickly continued their talks. I felt it odd to post information sheet

and consent form into the assemblage since they may influence the talks. For the three small close assemblages, I decided not to send consent forms to every member of the assemblage either. Because to do so, I needed to ask all of them to befriend me. It seemed that I recruited all of them to be my respondents. And I did not desire this. What I desired was to observe the online assemblages where my respondents were in, even they were close assemblages. To do an ethical research, I did the following in terms of small close assemblages. Firstly, I only observed small assemblages composed of strangers because strangers assemblages are open in the sense that members invited new members without asking consent in advance from any existing members in the assemblage. Secondly, for small close online assemblages I observed, I only observed patterned practices. I did not concentrate on the substantial content of interactions in the assemblage. Therefore, I would not use any personal and private content into my writing. Thirdly, I wrote fieldnotes about my observations, that is, paraphrasing, summarizing, and rewriting. No text messages in these online assemblages in the observation process were copied, stored, and attributed.

Many of my respondents talked about their WeChat and/or QQ chat groups in the interviews and I observed some of them posted their WeChat and/or QQ account on public social media platforms. I sent requests to those chat groups. As described in Chapter 5, my respondents moved many of their social relations online, mostly to WeChat. Tu (2016) notices this phenomenon in China too and argues the unavoidable influence of WeChat on China's civil society. For me in this project, it is ethical to take open and non-personal content small close assemblages as sites of study. Since there were potentials that I encountered private interactions between non-respondents, I took more vigorous measures to protect privacy and to respect both my respondents and their fellow members. I do not name the non-respondents and do not quote their communications without translation and paraphrasing.

As for exit, it occurred naturally when I and my respondents had casual exchange of greetings instead of substantial interviews. The respondents became my social media friends. I still liked or commented their posts, sent them festival greetings, and chatted with them when there were "trigger" topics as in the fieldwork. But I did not treat them as respondents anymore. They are my online acquaintances. Reich (2015) has already pointed out that social media enables respondents to embed in researcher's world, if

they want, and the engagement with researcher may not end naturally. The embedment and engagement are mutual, I think.

4.2.6 Online Observations

Media as practice theory suggests seeing what people do in relation to media (Couldry, 2004). In my case, it is to see what respondents did in online assemblages. So online observations became a natural selection for my practice-centred ethnography. Online observations allow "situated" interpretations of the observed (Hine, 2011: 569), or online assemblages in my project. I twist the term "situated" here by referring it to not only the fact that the understanding of interactions should be situated in the context where they are generated but also to the fact that the researcher should situate in that context too. That is, immersion and co-presence (Hine, 2017). It is similar to "hanging around, listening and observing" that are characteristic of ethnography but only in an online environment, or 'online version of "hanging out" '(Hine, 2011: 570). I was immersed in my sites which allowed me to gain understanding of the context of the assemblage interactions, of its norms, routines, dynamics, atmospheres. These data not only help me make better sense of individual's practice in online assemblages, they were important findings too to help me conceptualize civic virtue, as seen in Chapter 6. However, such immersion is far different from the "spatial embeddedness where the researcher pierces a subject's world" (Reich, 2015: 408) in anthropological ethnography. The respondents' online world, according to my interviews, trespassed different online assemblages on one social media platform and trespassed multi social media platforms too. Observations of their whole online world are both impractical and unethical. It is impractical simply because there were too many. Many of my respondents participated in dozens of online assemblages. It is unethical because even the part of respondents' online world on public social media platforms has shown many about them if their traces in different online assemblages were investigated at the same time. My research intended to know *about* their online assemblage participation, not to know all their online assemblage life. Therefore, for each respondent, I observed only a few of their online assemblage participation, or a few parts of their online world. I learned about the rest of their online assemblage life from interviews. This incomplete online observation may influence the findings of my research. But I think it is ethical to do so.

The parts of their online world that I chose to immerse in are mostly on public social media platforms, though as described in the above section,

some respondents' WeChat and QQ became my sites of online observations too. The unit of observation is respondents' acts in online assemblages, including their posts content, posting habits, and interactions between respondents and their assemblage members. My observations on the public social media platforms were various due to the unique technical characteristics of each social media platform. Even for the same type of social media platforms, for example, open and public platforms, each has its own method for observation. For example, observing assemblages on Douban involved browsing pages and post themes, time of posting, statistics of post viewing and commenting, reading the post, reading comments and replies, and looking at the liking statistics. It also involved examining participant's profile to see new added pictures, articles, activities, books, movies, and other updates. Whereas observing on Weibo involved following my participants, reading their posts, tracing the routes of posts, and keeping an eye on the followers and those whom my participants followed as well. Throughout the observation process, I paid special attention to look for the acts of my participants: their posts, comments, and interactions between them and their readers. Open and public social media platforms like Bilibili⁹ and Zhihu that my respondents said they used have very different technical design from Douban. Bilibili is like YouTube which is around senders and their subscribers. I could not see the interactions between the respondent and other users except for the updates of the one she subscribed. I did not collect data here but browsing from time to time to see what was going on there as a kind of supplementary materials for me to understand the social media environment of my respondents. Zhihu is like Quora, an asking and answering site, I traced respondents by searching their avatar names. I summarized in the fieldnotes what my participants did and said.

The so-called personal social media platforms became where my sites were as well. They are chat groups on WeChat and QQ. When observing these sites, I read interactions, saw their topics, changes of topics, numbers of members present, active members, felt their relationship, particularly the support, understanding, sympathy, collaboration, disagreement, and solution of disagreement between them. Meanwhile, WeChat Moments, or friend circle as it is called in Chinese, and the Profile of QQ automatically became sites. Keeping an eye on the updates of Moments and Profile became observations. The posts respondents sent on Moments or Profile let me

⁹ Popular video sharing social media platform in China.

know immediately if they sent “public” or “private” concern topics. These observations evidence my findings on close-tie online groups in Chapter 7 as well as the Internet Event in Chapter 9.

Therefore, different methods or techniques were used to observe different online assemblages on different social media platforms as sites. Adaptive ethnography is a useful concept here again.

Throughout my observations, the in-scope observation was the posting acts and content of my respondents and the immediate context of their posting acts and contents. Numerous online assemblages and posting content that had nothing to do with my respondents were out-of-scope observation. I might encounter out-of-scope content while searching my respondents’ posting acts but I did not record them in my fieldnotes.

Yet, observing WeChat Moments and QQ Profiles produced a dilemma. I used observation without participation method. But I needed to use Moments and Profile updates as means to build familiarities with respondents. Updating my Moments and Profile had the same purpose too. I needed to reply to their updates and posts either by liking or commenting as means to maintain familiarity with them. Besides, updating my Moments and Profile were means to show me as a trustable, traceable, sociable, and reliable person. I consider this dilemma as one characteristic of social media ethnography.

Another characteristic of my practice-centred adaptive ethnography is that co-presence appeared to be a problem in my fieldwork. It is argued that ethnographic approaches in the field of sociology place emphasis on the importance of direct, *in situ* observation of concrete sequences of activities (Baszanger and Dodier, 2004: 9). This is what is termed as the question of “sight” in doing qualitative research online (James and Busher, 2016: 31). Online observation in this project adapted and took advantage of the technological feature of social media, which displaces time and space (James and Busher, 2016: 42). In online environment, “direct” means co-member in an online space and *in situ* means being there when interactions occur. However, co-member does not necessarily mean co-presence in online assemblages. I strongly felt co-presence only in very dynamic interactions in WeChat and QQ chat groups when multiple members “talked” with each other synchronously, and in Weibo celebrity’s account whose posts were quickly reposted, commented, and liked. In other sites like inactive WeChat chat groups, Douban calligraphy group, respondents’ Weibo accounts, WeChat Moments, Zhihu, Bilibili and Baidu Tieba, co-

presence with my respondents were not often or even rare. Co-presence is not only technologically enabled, it is more people enabled. Co-presence or not did not influence my findings, it is part of my findings instead. It tells about active members, inactive members, and lurkers; regular or contingent participation; interactive or non-interactive communication in online assemblages and so on. These are important data about online assemblage practices.

I tried to be online in the social media assemblages which were my sites as much as I could. The purpose was to achieve what are argued as “multidimensionality of context” and “multiplicity of context” of social media content (Winter and Lavis, 2019). The former refers to various aspects of social media content: layering and looping of words and images, interactions between different forms of data, the nuances of speech or text, etc. (Winter and Lavis, 2019: 3) and the latter refers to the connection between content cross multi social media platforms (Winter and Lavis, 2019: 5). Though my project is people and practice-centred instead of content-centred, these arguments echo my findings on the importance of context. To achieve a full-round understanding of context, I took advantage of social media technologies and did both synchronous and asynchronous observations. When the respondents and I were online at the same time, it is synchronous observation. Otherwise, it is asynchronous observation. Yet, I realized there was no big difference between synchronous and asynchronous observation in this project. Because in both observations, I was not intrusive by participating. My presence or absence has not any effect on the assemblage interactions. Asynchronous observation also includes reviewing the past posts in the online assemblages (most public social media has this function). In both situations, I did observation without participation, which means I lurked across the fieldwork period. Unless members invited me to join their interactions, asked me directly, or cued me in their talk, I usually kept my presence unknown. This is for keeping the influence of my presence on the naturalness of data minimal.

Social media online setting provides perfect chances for observation without joining in interactions. The majority of social media nowadays do not exhibit the “online, offline, or lurking” status of online assemblage members. No one in an assemblage is aware of other members’ presence unless they post something to the assemblage. This responds to the “naturalistic” claim of ethnography: observing real life in real context without interference from the presence of the researcher. Since my presence or not was not only unknown

to assemblage members but also effect-less to assemblage interactions, my online observation is an unobtrusive method. However, a potential problem with observation without participation is that as an external observer, I may not be able to really understand some practices as an participant. I made up this loss via online interviews.

4.2.7 Online Interviews

In addition to “what people do in relation to media,” the other part of media as practice as “what people say in relation to media” and “what people say about what they do” (Couldry, 2004) were explored by using online interviews. Online interviews and online observations complement each other in my fieldwork. Online observations facilitated online interviews and verified interview data. Facilitating interviews includes seeking opportunities or timing for initiating interviews; building familiarity with the topics; wording opening remarks of the interview and interview questions; and generating interview questions. Verifying interview data means I used observation data as reference to see if they matched interview data. On the other hand, online interviews generated data that I could not achieve from observations, particularly data on multi assemblage participation and motivations of participation.

The open-endedness of practice-centred online ethnography allowed me to conduct online interviews without a pre-planned question list but only with a firm grip on practice-centred questions. Practice-centred questions, informed by media as practice theory, were questions like the numbers of online assemblages respondents participated in, on what social media platforms, with whom, when they participated in, why to participate in, what they did, how they did, why they remained active or inactive or lurked, etc. These questions were iteratively asked in multiple interviews to learn about respondents past and present practices, from one social media platform to another, and from one online assemblage to another. This allowed me to dig very deep into some participants’ rich social media practices as seen in Chapter 8.

I devised interview questions to ask questions about what respondents did in online assemblage and why they did what they did instead of asking questions to capture the civic practices in online assemblages owing to three consideration. One is ethical consideration. I think it is more ethical to ask respondents open-ended questions on general everyday online assemblage practices without focusing on civic activities than framing questions in order to capture civic virtue or inducing respondents to talk about their civic

activities. It is more ethical to wait for dimensions related to civic virtue to emerge, and then I took the chance to explore further. For example, I did not ask respondents questions like “Do you use Weibo for news? Do you join online discussion on news?” Instead, when a respondent said she used Weibo for news, I asked what kind of news, if she commented on them, if she read comments on news, if she commented on others’ comments, if she joined discussions on news, if she reposted news, what kind of posts she reposted, etc. I asked this sort of questions on any topic that respondents brought forward. I did not want the respondents to feel that I was particularly interested in certain kind of topics. This enabled me key insights to the argument of multiple self and the challenge to the conceptualization of the civic discussed in Chapter 5. The second consideration is my conceptualization of the civic of the social, as said earlier. My research aims to find out the diverse dimensions of the civic in participation in social media assemblages. I did not want any specific emphasis on specific types of topics masked the emergence of other possible type of civic. Thirdly, the Chinese translation of civic is the same as that of “citizen,” a vocabulary that is not in people’s everyday life, not usual in casual talks, but very politically sensitive instead. I did not want to touch respondents’ sensitive nerves to such vocabulary. Therefore, I never used terms like “citizen,” “civic,” “civic virtue,” “civic engagement,” “political participation” etc. in my interviews unless the respondents used these words first. I occasionally used “public” and “private” when respondents brought forward relevant topics.

I conducted semi-structured interviews in a dynamic and constructive way to devise interview questions. Constructive means that though I was always the one to initiate a talk, the respondents usually led the talk. I was the one to push the talk when the talk paused, but the talk went to the direction and at the speed with the respondents’ will. Dynamic means that online semi-structured interviews were conducted in a variety of ways up to the wish and convenience of the respondents, or respondents-tailored. Some interviews were synchronous audio interviews via WeChat; some were instantaneous interchanges of text messages and/or audio messages between respondents and me on several social media platforms; some interviews were asynchronous text messages and/or audio messages; all up to respondents’ contingent preference. I found there were distinctive differences between audio and text interviews, or the differences of showing meaning with voice and with wording. In audio interviews, I used voice control, like the volume, the pace, the pitch, the quality, and changes of them to build rapport with the respondents. These are the aforementioned

sensitivity and subtleness that my ethnographic approach enabled. There were always cases that we understood each other even without completing a sentence. While in text interviews, clarity of understanding was totally dependent on wording. It always occurred that I worded a sentence again and again until I found the clearest and most accurate wording. I was more aware of the “framing” effect of words I used in text interviews and I tried my best to reduce such effect to its minimum by using more general vocabularies, giving explanations instead of using terms, and sometimes asking a question in different ways.

I also found that the differences between synchronous and asynchronous interviews were rather outstanding. Synchronous interviews are like tight-knitted Tango dancing, with the two parties changing leading and following status smoothly and in a mutually collaborated way, though I always let the respondents lead the talk unless they were reluctant to do so. It was easier to build a pleasant atmosphere for the interview and was less intrusive when I asked one after another follow-up questions. It is usually more productive and informative. Whereas in asynchronous interviews, there were more “variables” in the conduct of a satisfactory interview. The respondents’ “good will” to cooperate with me, willingness to talk, extent of talkativeness, habit of using social media, rhythm of daily routine etc., all influenced the effectiveness and efficiency of the interviews. Besides, it is more difficult to balance productiveness and intrusiveness. There were more ethical concerns with asynchronous interviews. I always traded off productiveness to avoid appearing intrusive and inquisitive.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted repeatedly with each respondent. The “structured” part refers to practice-centred questions listed above which were universal to all interviews and the semi-structured part means that the ways to apply those universal points were improvised in each interview in terms of order of questions, wording of questions, focus of each interview, means of interview (text message, audio message, or audio interviewing), depth of interviews, range of questions, length of interviews, frequencies of interviews, interactivity in interviews, rhythms of interviews, and spontaneity of generative or generic questions. Semi-structured interviews gave me both the same thread of interviews with each respondent so that the interviews with each of them were comparable, and the freedom to tap each interview and respondent. The thread was respondents’ practices of using online assemblages including the personal history (or experiences) of using social media and social media assemblages in

particular, reasons of changes and shifting using habits, the social media online assemblages that they were members at the time of interview, the facts of those assemblages, the purposes of joining those assemblages, what they did there, why they did that way, what they thought of their assemblages and their assemblage members. This kind of broad-brush questions was like prospecting, to break the ice with the respondent, to initiate an interview after an interval of time, and to steer the conversation when necessary. The improvisations, on the other hand, were on much more detailed exploration of the above-mentioned broad topics and were highly responsive to respondents' accounts. Many questions were generated by the respondents' replies to the above-mentioned broad questions by digging deeper and deeper. The "structured" questions steered the direction of the interview and the freelance questions built the road. Chapter 8 is particularly drawn on this data.

The other part of the freelance questions was from the immediate responses to the observed data. When respondents sent posts in their personal social media on their online assemblages experiences, topics of public concern, or screenshots of online assemblage interactions, or make some special comments in public social media online assemblages, for example, complaining about work stress and getting sympathetic remarks from assemblage members, I sent invitations for interviews. The questions were around the specific events or anecdotes and sometimes extended to more general practice-centred questions.

Online interviews were made iteratively in this project. That is, when unexpected topics emerged in one interview, the topics would be included in following interviews with other respondents. In this way, questions were snowballing and became one of the dynamics to go back to a respondent again and again.

I used text interviews creatively in online interviews. Text interview depends on some unique skills, as compared with other forms of interviews. I used both synchronous and asynchronous text interviews. In synchronous text interviews, I needed to judge throughout the interview the right time to take my turn, because there was no straightforward clue if the interviewee finished her turn. I did not want to interrupt her, neither did I want long and embarrassing intervals. I needed also to be active in keeping the interview go on. When the interviewee finished sending text messages in the interview, I quickly continued the interview with feedback, or another question. When to stop the interview was a big concern. Since most of my

text interviews were conducted at the respondents' fragments of time, I became very aware of not to take too much of their time at one time. Bringing an interview to its end was like an artistic work.

In asynchronous text interviews, I usually asked several questions at one time. The respondents had more freedom to decide when they replied, what they replied, how they replied, and how much they replied. The drawback was that it moved on very slowly. Sometimes respondents told me they forgot to reply.

4.2.8 Fieldnotes

Fieldnotes are important method of generating data in my fieldwork, particularly for the observation of small close assemblages. I started writing fieldnotes when the first fieldwork started. I wrote only when I had something to say, for example, when I wrote observation descriptions and reflections; when I read literature and reflected on how they were related to my fieldwork.

The descriptions of the site are usually dependent on the ethnographer's personal capacity. While in my project, the archive function of the social media website itself saved me a lot of work, though it may not be completely reliable. Particularly in terms of censored content, I often saw deleted Weibo posts and reposts and banned reposted articles on WeChat Moments on some respondents' profiles. I kept them as statistics in fieldnotes. I sometimes copied some social media statistics to my fieldnotes unless those statistics had nothing to do with any personal information of my respondents. But mostly I did not copy social media data and only paraphrase them or recorded highlights in the fieldnotes.

4.2.9 Data Store and Reservation

Some data are not stored privately by me, either because it is difficult to store without technical software or because I don't want to store because I have no consent. These are data from observations. These data are open and public on social media sites and I can access conveniently. However, these data are under state censorship and have the risk of being deleted or blocked. I made preventive measures by counting, paraphrasing, and summarizing in fieldnotes.

The reserved ones are transcripts of interview, both audio ones and text ones. These are data from interviews.

4.3 Data Coding

Coding is a creatively interpretive process of data analysis by classifying and categorizing data. It is also a process of cleverly, that is, subjectively, interpreting “objective” data, or collision of subjectivity and objectivity. In my open-ended research design, subjectively interpreting means I had no instruction manual to follow when I tried to classify and categorize messy qualitative data. Besides, I had no blueprint to guide what kind of civic I “expected” to find out since I had no pre-assumptions, as mentioned earlier. All I had was firstly, expectations, or even beliefs, that there are certain internal connections among data and I could get them. And secondly, literature on civic virtue and relevant theories. To related data to literature was almost impossible before data was classified and categorized. For me, subjectively interpreting means two symbiotic beliefs: I had to decide to “get” the internal connections between data or to assign connections between data; and to relate data to literature or to relate literature to data. Here I followed media as practice theory by getting the internal connections between acts and activities of practices between respondents and seeking literature which were related to my findings.

The subjectively interpreting data also involves expanding, transforming and reconceptualizing data (DeCuir et al, 2011: 138). With mountains of messy data gained from fieldwork, once again I followed media as practice theory. I grouped data according to similarities in practices. Though in this process, I was aware that “Analysis involves systematic coding and extracting of information from the transcripts rather than looking for confirmation of your initial ideas.” (Rubin and Rubin, 2005: 202). The creativity of coding then emerges: it is about making balance between respecting data and fitting coding to the research question; it is about the cleverly combining the above techniques in doing so; and it is about “doing the right thing with the right data”. My coding was also an iterative, and even “circular” process (DeCuir et al, 2011: 138). I not only went back to the raw data again and again, I also went back with escalating level of theorizing at each time.

“Objective data” means that I took data as objective, as object of coding. It also means that data were independent of my brainwork. I worked on data, or with data. I broke data into units, but not pieces. I assembled and reassembled data units, but not whatever way I wanted. The internal connections between data stopped me from doing so. Data gained their own life to a certain extent and data framed my subjectivity.

So coding is the “collision” between my subjectivity and objective data. And the results are the “chemical reaction” of the collision. Coding is a chemical process. The importance of coding is highlighted by the argument that “[t]he decisions the researcher makes when coding largely shape what he or she will be able to conclude during the analysis” (Rubin and Rubin, 2005: 208). Besides, “coding *is* analysis” (DeCuir, et al. 2011:8 *Italic* given by the author). In this project, the coding process is the analysis process. The destination of coding is theorizing. Moreover, in my project, coding is also the means to integrate different kind of data: interview data, observation data, and descriptive and reflective fieldnotes.

In this project, there are two ways of coding: informal coding and formal coding. Informal coding refers to the ongoing process of extracting key terms and then applying them in ensuing interviews, constantly comparing interview data, and getting repeated themes from different interviews throughout the fieldwork. This informal coding uses some grounded theory skills (Flick, 2018). For example, constant comparative process. In this way, coding is integrated in observation and online interview.

Formal coding involves transcribing, coding transcribed data, doing thematic analysis of transcribed data, and integrated observations into thematic analysis of transcribed data. Formal coding was conducted eight months after the beginning of the fieldwork when the focus of the research has shifted from data generation and collection to analysis. Fieldwork has never ended throughout the analysis process. They were side by side.

I mainly use thematic analysis in coding, seeing emerging patterns and themes. Thematic analysis is used to see the commonality between data, or patterns of themes, and differences or idiosyncratic characteristics. An author argues that thematic analysis is “a way of seeing, what one sees through thematic analysis does not appear to others, even if they are observing the same information, events, or situations” (Boyatzis, 1998: 1). This argument matches the subjective part of coding. It is also a changing way of seeing, as seen in repeated coding process using thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis in this project is used combining a priori codes and empirical codes. “[A] priori codes are created to reflect categories that are already of interest before the research has begun; empirical codes are derived while reading through the data, as points of importance and commonality are identified” (Harding, 2013: 82). Some authors term these two concepts as theory-driven and data-driven coding (DeCuir et al, 2011: 137).

As said earlier, fieldwork, literature reading, reflective fieldnotes as well as coding are all combined in this project. Therefore, the “a priori” or theory-driven coding is never completely separated from empirical or data-driven coding. They are mixed in some sense. Or rather, they are integrated in an iterative process. Literature reading, including literature on theoretical framework and methodologies, gives new insights into coding and coding pushes the research to do more literature reading. That is to say, a priori concepts and emerging themes are only relative.

Thematic analysis method stresses the emerging of patterns from coding process. In my case, patterns emerged from themes and concepts which were created from literature, interview questions, interviewees’ repeatedly mentioning, indirectly revealed, emerging from comparing interviews, and new concepts and themes suggesting by existing concepts and themes, typologies, stories, figures of speech, slogans, symbols, and own labelling (Rubin and Rubin, 2005: 209-219). I do see emerged patterns in my coding, the prerequisite is that I have conceptual frameworks or a priori expectations on what I’m looking at. These are mostly structured questions and the emerged patterns are around the words I use in wording the interview questions.

As for steps of using thematic analysis, each author has their own recommendations. I feel that it is useful to borrow a bit from all of them. Thematic analysis is not a procedure, but a “cyclical act” (Saldana, 2013: 8). With the help of the “frames” of thematic analysis mentioned in the previous paragraph, I still felt the data were open to many interpretations. Or, data themselves are not enough to point to the “right” way of interpreting. One influencing factor is myself: my perspective, my position, and my intention in conceptualization and theorization. This is what the subjectively interpreting refers to. I often felt the temptations to code the data and theorize in dialectic directions. This is because data are dialectic. They are never neat and tidy. To cope with this problem, I tried multiple-dimensional coding. Multiple-dimensional means that coding is tried in different ways. There was one-by-one coding, which involves coding transcriptions and text interviews one by one, seeking commonalities, distinguishing particularities, and theorizing based on commonalities and particularities. There were vertical and horizontal coding. Vertical coding is more detailed coding of each transcript after the one-by-one coding to see the different options of different combination of units of data, with the help of insights gained after the first round of one-by-one coding. This involves cutting transcript into

different data unit, centring on different “key word,” and trying different combinations to see the “chemical reaction” of each option. Horizontal coding is the trial of vertical coding cross transcripts. I did manual coding without using any software. There was integrated coding, that is, to integrate observation data and fieldnotes into previously mentioned coding process.

I found out more techniques to do thematic analysis except the universally mentioned comparison and contrast, grouping data according to theme, and associating. Terms like “inclusion and exclusion”, “ordering and valuing”, “establish relations of equivalence” refer to principles and methods in describing inventive methods (Lury and Wakeford, eds, 2012: 2) but I found them echoing what I did in coding data. Inclusion and exclusion in coding data refer to grouping data with common themes and leaving out those that were only from individual respondents. Ordering and valuing are finding out the sequence from most repetitive themes or patterns to least repetitive ones. Establishing relations of equivalence refer to means to associate data, for example, from different data generation means like observational data and interview data.

During these processes, I learned that there were many ways to code and theorize data, as I saw from my many trials and attempts. Each led to different findings and conclusions. It is the adherence to media as practice theory leading me to go through these trials and attempts and decided the most suitable way among many possibilities. The decisions on the most suitable way involve the “politics” of coding, or the competing factors influencing me in making decisions. My findings are result of such influences.

During these processes, some coding is spontaneous or instinctive, while most coding is intentional or deliberate. And coding is a constantly changing process. The changes were caught and reflected into fieldnotes and became inspirational sources for future coding.

I think a quote best summarizes my conceptualization of coding and my conduct of coding: “Among most qualitative researchers, it is generally agreed upon that there is more than *one* way of making meaning from the data that we analyse, which means there isn’t a single ‘right’ answer. One of the criticisms of qualitative research from some quantitative researchers is that, if that’s the case, then our analyses are simply ‘made up’ and don’t tell us anything meaningful; that ‘anything goes’ in qualitative research. This is empathically not the case. An analysis of qualitative data tells one *story*

among many that could be told about the data” (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 20).

4.4 Ethics

I tried my utmost to do an ethical research and my fieldwork was ethics-led. Every trivial consideration, choice, and decision throughout the fieldwork concerned ethics. From the wording of invitations for recruitment, the timing of interview invitation, to the choice of “liking” or “commenting” and elaborating comments on respondents’ social media posting, ethics were not only principles to follow but acts to do in the fieldwork. In this project, it is not only “being ethical”, but also doing ethics. “Doing ethics” is especially highlighted in this project because in social media ethnography, ethnographer and respondents communicate according to very few “cues.” In this project, the cues were mainly text. A large portion of communication was filled with my ethics-supported “sensing” based on text reading and writing. In other words, without the support of multiple cues like the same physical settings, facial expressions, body languages, eye contact, voice pitches, volumes and paces, laughter, and so on, I was highly dependent on ethical concerns and principles to do the most important two things in conducting observations and multiple online interviews and keeping online acquaintances with the respondents: timing of contacting the respondents and wording of means of contact.

Mainly three principles were adhered to in doing ethics in the fieldwork in addition to the ethical guidelines mentioned above like informed consent, anonymity, data protection etc: firstly, respondents first; secondly, respondents-led; thirdly, minimal interference. And in the following sections, these three principles will be explained in detail.

4.4.1 Respondents First

Respecting respondents and putting respondents prior to the result of the research were the first criterion in the fieldwork. I was highly sensitive to the privacy and security of respondents. Throughout the fieldwork, I never asked any real-life information about my respondents unless they mentioned in the interviews or put on their social media profiles. My mobile phone and laptop, through which I communicated with respondents, were under tight protection throughout the fieldwork. Besides, a vigorous anonymization system was used. Respondents were completely anonymized, and no clue could link their names in my thesis to their online names. And I do not know their real

names in life. When their quotes were used in this writing, they were mentioned by anonymized names so that they were unidentifiable with least online traces involved in participation in this research. Besides, their communication with me was only between them and me. No third party could have access, at least in my part.

During the fieldwork, the censorship on China's social media was getting tighter and tighter. The security of respondents became a special concern. Except for anonymization, I protected respondents' security by taking the following measures: firstly, I never initiated asking questions concerning social media hot events topics in online interviews unless the respondents mentioned or posted relevant content. I never asked political and civic oriented questions if the respondents were not observed of such activities or they did not initiate such topics. This may influence the quality of my findings, but I think an ethical research is more important than the quality of the research. Secondly, when respondents posted some political and/or hot-event-topic related content, the relevant content was referred to as "that post" without mentioning the content or its key words in online interviews. When they initiated sensitive topics in the interviews, euphemisms were used, like "reasons we all know", or "that, you know", or "404" (The code is seen when the reposted article on WeChat is banned. It is a popular euphemism for banned content on China's social media).

Another mechanism to protect privacy and safety is the storage of data concerning the research. All data collected from and relevant to fieldwork, including recordings of audio online interviews and their transcriptions, coding systems, and so on were kept safely on University's OneDrive cloud storage and in my own personal M drive on the University system. No one else can access these data without my consent.

Another concern was how to avoid the respondents from feeling "being surveilled" when I kept an eye on their online traces in observations. I let them know in the information sheet and consent sheet that I became their fellow members in their online assemblages. I liked and/or commented their online posts at a variety of rhythms. I initiated multiple interviews at various intervals. I created a kind of "natural" social media encounter with them.

The rights of the respondents to keep silent and to withdraw were highly respected. These rights were written clearly in the information sheet and consent sheet. And I reminded them from time to time in interviews of such rights. Besides, if they did not reply in my text interview for three times, I took

this as the sigh that they withdrew and stopped sending them more text messages.

The application of respondents-first principle leads to many respondents-led practices. This will be described in the following section.

4.4.2 Respondents-led

A special concern arose from text communication which the fieldwork heavily relied on, that is, wording. From the wording of recruitment invitation to the wording of online interview questions, respecting respondents was realized by tailored-wording. For example, each recruitment invitation was individually tailored after a careful examination of each potential respondent's profiles and group interaction history to avoid the "autonomous" feel of bulk messaging. The tones, vocabularies, and styles of text communication and the uses of emoji, stickers, emoticons, and memes were tailored case by case and person by person according to observations and interview contact. In other words, I was like a "mirror" and each respondent saw their own way of speaking in my responsive communication with them.

Respondents also had a say in the timing, rhythm, and forms of online interviews. Some of them chose asynchronous interviews. I then had to control myself from "bombarding" them with questions and elaborated on a proper amount of questions asked at one time. The trade-off was the "productiveness" of the interviews. Some interviews progressed very slowly. The multiple interviews were not conducted randomly or when I wanted to. I never started an interview without "causes" or "triggers." Instead, I grasped the chances when the respondents sent something that I thought could be the starting point of an interview. And it is the respondents who decided if they received my interview invitations, time that a reply took, how many questions they would answer, and audio, text, or mixed ways of communication. In other words, the respondents decided what they wanted to say, when and how. Yet, I was cautious with appearing intrusive or inquisitive and always elaborating the timing.

Another high priority ethical concern involved the "proper" distance between me and the respondents: neither too distant to stop respondents from chatting with me from time to time; nor too close or intimate which might influence the "originality" of the data; nor too intrusive to respondents' privacy and private life. This is a particularly distinctive issue since most of my respondents and I were online acquaintances of each other. We were

each other's WeChat or QQ friends. We got involved in each other's private life to certain extent, though at a controlled level. We saw each other's selfie, family album, travelling photos, acclaims and complaints of personal life, and other private information. We had a kind of social media "friendship." For me, I think friendship is a necessary evil. It facilitated ethnography but blurred the role of the researcher as a researcher and user; and may weaken the awareness of the respondents as being observed and researched. I dealt with such necessary evil by sensitizing each respondent's specific "criteria" of intimacy and privacy and I let the respondents decide the proper distance between them and me. I sent them questions from time to time or initiated chatting on what they did to remind them of my role/identity as a researcher; I asked for their opinions for the best time for an interview; I asked for their opinions from time to time in the interviews to go on or stop; I depended on the private/public level of the content of their posts to make proper responses and took a proper position in the distance between them and me. They decided the distance between us and I took a position correspondingly.

4.4.3 Minimal Interference

In social media ethnography, I observed respondents' online presence, which is only a small part of their life. Most of their time, which is offline, was absent from my observation. I then had to "guess" the right time to invite them for interviews, to send them text questions, to send greetings after a long interval, to pick up a broken talk or topic etc., based on my judgement of their online presence. Here, I tried my best to avoid interfering in their life, like a nuisance. I tried my best to avoid taking their office time/class time, weekends, leisure time, and family time. Yet, respondents showed a variety of "preferred" interaction time, for example, some respondents preferred to receive my online interviews at their office time; some preferred meal time; others preferred leisure time. So I followed their routines to keep minimal interference.

I also tried to keep minimal interference and influence in the originality of their interactions with me. Here I tried to keep balance between absence and presence. My absence was for keeping the influence of my presence on what they said and what they did minimal. Whereas my presence was for building and maintaining familiarity with them.

Another minimal interference refers to online interviewing. I avoided inducing respondents to say what I wanted to hear by using neutral vocabularies and tones of talking. I did not judge what the respondents said and did. And I mostly followed them instead of directing them.

4.4.4 Ethics is Collaborative and Creative

In summary, doing ethics in this research means fieldwork is a conscientious, responsive, collaborative, and creative project between me and respondents.

The creativity to let ethical principles “fit” the project is quite improvising and case by case. Ethics were unexpectedly encountered and then solved on the spot in the field. They were throughout the fieldwork. They were reflected in minor decisions on wording interview questions, accessing respondents, polishing opening and closing remarks in interview, grasping the interview opportunities, considering the “right” distance from the respondents and the extent to get involved in their social media space, and many more.

The ethics of doing academic research are ongoing project and each single project is a critical application of existing ethics as well as contributing to the existing ethics. It is until the day-to-day conduct of fieldwork that I realize that each project is such a specific case that critical and creative application of existing ethics is not enough. The researcher must grope her way to make ethical decisions, in the course of which contributing to what should be ethical research and how to make it. In other words, ethical concerns shape the directions and steps of this research, and fieldwork in particular.

Chapter 5

Multiplicity of Online Assemblage Participation and Collectivity

5.1 Introduction

Practice-centred online ethnography directs me to follow respondents cross social networks and social media platforms. This chapter unpacks the findings on the prevalence and multiplicity of online assemblages in my respondents' daily life and argues that online assemblage formation and participation bring complexities to the conceptualization of civic virtue by multiplying dimensions of self, diversifying participation, and embedding the civic into the social. Using the construction of online assemblage as an ontological tool to look at the aggregating of people and content of their interactions on social media, I explore overall features of such aggregating, that is, diversity of online assemblages brings out multiple dimensions of the civic and prevalence of online assemblages brings conflicting forces to the practices of the civic. I argue that online assemblages are arenas of idiosyncratic and circumstantial interactions between self and the collective and bring conflicting forces to the practices of the civic.

The following is a detailed summary of the findings from my data. Such summaries are useful because it is from such summaries that themes for following chapters emerge. By depicting the multiplicity of online assemblage participation and features of such multiple participation, this chapter looks at the scale of individual's multiple online gatherings and its implications for civic practices. I first summarize the findings on prevalence of online assemblages in using social media and then describe the features of multiple online assemblage participation in terms of diversity, conflicting forces of such diversity, and the range of such diversity on coverage of social life. I then theorize the effect of these findings on conceptualizations of self, participation, and civic virtue. This chapter is a basis for arguments and analysis in the following chapters.

5.2 Prevalence of Online Grouping and Collective Life

When I asked respondent Chuan when she usually used mobile phone and for what, the co-host of a local old building protection group made up of volunteers which was rather well-known in her hometown for more than seven years, said: "Anytime. Any moment of time. As soon as I switch on my

mobile phone I habitually check WeChat¹⁰. Very habitually. As soon as I unlock my phone, I check WeChat. A very familiar habit. Check WeChat first. Check chat groups first. Check if there are any updates or messages. Then check if there are any one-on-one messages from personal friends.” By doing these acts as “a habit of hand” in her words, Chuan said she had the feeling of always being in groups, with different roles, and with natural and automatic switch from one role/group to another.

From my fieldwork, I found that all other respondents had bits of this or that similar to Chuan’s use of online groups: Embodied uses of mobile phones anytime and anywhere when possible; habitual check of online group content/update; moving major, if not all, social relations online and grouping them in various ways; participation in multiple groups, many of which correspond to different roles in social relationships; lubricant switch from one role to another and therefore from one group to another, usually in the blink of an eye; intimate and close relations first, more distant and public relations second. The difference between respondents is the numbers of social media apps they use, the range of aspect of their life covered by those apps, the extent of roles of social relations moved online, and time spent on those apps. For all of them, multiple online groups and switching between them are part of their mobile phone’s uses and daily routines.

Such prevalent use of online assemblages have not been researched much. Some researchers have noticed the embodied uses of social media (Hine, 2015, 2017), online maintenance of acquaintance relations (Chambers, 2013), and civic participation in social media groups (Zhang, 2014; Wang and Shi, 2018). Yet, the significance of such large scale everyday life conducted in online assemblages trespassing academically distinguished individual, social and civic boundaries, specifically in terms of civic life, is not researched much yet. This project is an initial attempt and I term such significance as collective life. I argue that people live a certain degree of collective life in online assemblages in social media age. Such collective life constantly keep people with others online, bringing opportunities for practices of civic virtue.

The plurality and diversity of online assemblage participation that I found from interviews and observations on multiple sites of my fieldwork are not captured by current literature too. In a screenshot respondent Xin sent me

¹⁰ The most popular social networking site in China.

about a day of her mobile phone use, WeChat took the largest chunk. And all the rest on the list were other social media apps. Besides, Nong said she had a resource sharing group on Baidu SkyDrive, similar to OneDrive. Ma said that online live broadcasting and online teaching are also online groups. He said some apps that he often used were online groups for him, including a music app where users read each other's comments and follow those who have the same taste on music; a news app QDaily¹¹ which has a section to ask questions and invite subscribers to answer except the usual commenting function after each news article; and some online street snaps groups. He said about the news app: "Except that registered users form a group, I think thought circles and topics discussions are also intangible groups. The QDaily can be understood as a thought circle with aggregates of UGC¹², PGC¹³ topics. So I think it's a group." Ma suggested that doing about the same thing in the same online space, in spite of any other factor like numbers of doers, asynchronous doing, spatial distance, social-economic-cultural differences, etc., forms online group. The collective doing online is layered into piecemeal aspects of life, from entertainment and leisure to thoughts and identification, each "materialized" as aggregates of both people and content.

Such collective life is technologically afforded by a default function that many social media platforms and apps now have in order to attract users: online grouping. Grouping function refers to the setting up group function, BBS section, community section, the sharing section, the topic, theme, or interest group section, the following or subscribing section, the commenting section, the inviting participation section as seen in QDaily, the automatic "inviting your friend" function, and/or the automatic searching phone book function that many online media or apps provide. These functions intend to network users and are seen not only on social networking sites. They are configurations of the networking "gene" of social media which are injected into users' daily use. Such technologically networking gene is "embedded, embodied, and everyday" (Hine, 2017b: 21). Scholars point out this technological feature as networking (Loader and Mercea, 2012; Hinton and

¹¹ A controversial news app which was blocked for publishing translated articles from New York Times.

¹² User-generated content

¹³ Professionally-produced content

Hjorth 2013; Milan, 2013; boyd, 2014; Highfield, 2016) and connectivity (Dijck, 2012; 2013; Chambers, 2013) of Web 2.0. My research adds to the literature with the argument of online collective life which looks at the layering of everyday life by networking and connectivity and people combining technological affordances to form multi-dimensional civic practices, as seen in the next section.

Online assemblages are not just seen on social media platforms. They are everywhere online. That is, almost any online use now generates assemblages: from the old-styled news portals to the latest News apps and various other apps; from shopping websites to gaming websites. Online grouping is not only about people choosing to gather, it is also about people being grouped by their online uses. It is an unavoidable use of the online. It is in this sense that the construct of online assemblage is used and researched in this project. It is in this background of prevalence of online gatherings and collectives of people and content embedded in online uses these days in China that this project is set. And it is in this sense that I want to see if such prevailing online assemblages have civic significance in China. In this sense and background, I argue that all online assemblages are out of collective efforts, actively and passively. Active collective efforts refer to self-aggregating of people or people choose to aggregate whereas passive collective efforts refer to those automatically allocated by grouping and networking function of social media technologies. Such collective efforts challenge the understanding of the civic.

5.3 Diversity of Online Assemblages and Multi-dimension of the Civic

There is no way to exhaust the types of online assemblages since there are simply too many. Based on my respondents descriptions of their uses of social media and on my observations of some “sites,” I found some types of online assemblages including but not limited to: family and relative and intimate friends; alumni; colleague including “official ones” set up in the name of the working organization and casual ones; interest and hobby (e.g. pet-owner, calligraphy practicing, photography, American soap opera audience etc.); blog and vblog assemblage made up the blogger and her followers or subscribers; topic assemblages; identity assemblages (e.g. those of fans groups; of people from the same hometown; of people buying the same size of bra); information sharing (e.g. sharing coupon and discount information; sharing critical public account articles); task or project

assemblages (e.g. answering the same question on Zhihu, equivalent of Quora; or answering the same survey question on news app QDaily); chatting and acquaintance assemblages (no specific theme or topic); peer assemblages (people with the same problem or situation or other commonalities, e.g. patients of certain disease) etc.

Diversity not only refers to content, modality, social relation, role, topic or theme of online assemblages that the above list shows. It also includes size, activeness, interactivity, and longevity of online assemblages that are decided out of collective efforts. It also covers hybrids of open and close assemblages, acquaintance and strangers assemblages, synchronous and asynchronous assemblages, and assemblages with various other online technological features. Most importantly, diversity refers to multiple participation of the above-mentioned diverse assemblages by individual respondent and their diverse pattern of uses of each online assemblage.

The diversity of online assemblages and the diverse range of penetrations of diverse online assemblages into social and civic life have not been picked up by the literature. Most literature on people's (instead of organizations) civic engagement are either platform specific, for example, Facebook (Warren et al, 2014); Weibo (Liu, 2015); WeChat (Tu, 2016); Qiangguo Luntan, a news forum hosted by government media, in China (Yang, 2003); or issue or event centred. For example, Wang and Shi take ordinary Weibo users and the opinion leaders, or elite Weibo users that ordinary users follow, as "issue-based civic groups" (2018: 516). Dong et al (2017) argue Weibo-centred Internet events, or collective reposting on a topic to make it arrest attention and even intervention of the government, as online civic and political participation in China. The civic significance of more day-to-day, prevailing, diverse, and ordinary users' collective practices in vast online assemblages are unresearched.

My project fills the gap by arguing multiple dimensions, some of them are contrasting, of the civic. The first contrasting dimensions are civic in the traditional sense as community or political concern and the civic as contributing to collective efforts. Such collective efforts may have internal good only, that is, beneficial to the members, or have external good. Internal and external good are the second contrasting dimensions of the civic.

The political or community concern style of civic is seen in various forms of civic interactions in online assemblages. Exchanges of reposted articles on public topics without many exchanges of words, mixing civic talks with social

chats, political talk, grassroots activists with various personal characteristics, are detailed in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8.

The internal good dimension of the civic is seen in many creative uses of online assemblages. One example is the many “to-do-together” assemblage on WeChat. The most ordinary is clocking-in groups¹⁴ in which members send daily clocking message for various desired objectives: reading books, studying foreign language, keeping fit, doing exercises, writing essay, getting up early, and so on. I saw posts calling for setting up WeChat calligraphy practicing clocking assemblages in the calligraphy group I observed. Clocking-in assemblages intend to use collective efforts to enhance self-discipline. A question on Zhihu asks “What awkward WeChat chat groups have you ever participated in?” And there are more than 600 replies describing all kinds of awkward WeChat chat groups they joined or heard of. This question and replies have been browsed sixteen million times and the top browsed reply described an audio message group whose members were said to be researchers using animals in medical research. The members were said to feel guilty about doing this and each member sent an audio message every day saying a Buddhism prayer phrase. Members were required to listen to all the audio messages sent a day so that they could relieve the souls of the dead animals. In the fieldwork, I heard about online assemblages from a contact who was a TV reporter. He said he was often invited to join interviewee’s WeChat chat groups. One is made up of property owners to communicate on how to maintain their rights. When their objective was achieved, this assemblage was turned into one for group purchase. The other is made up of motorbike taxi drivers (banned in the city) who send notifications about police patrols so that members in the group could escape police arrest. These creative uses of online collective efforts benefit members and usually do no harm to outsiders. They mix the civic and the social. My work cannot cover all of them but is an initial attempt to reveal their civic significance, to be detailed in Chapter 6.

The mechanisms that some online assemblages produce external good or benefits to others beyond the collective will be explored in depth. Chapter 6 examines social interactions, the most often seen online collective interactions in various hobby, interest-based, topic casual chat, various social relation-based assemblages and so on, that have civic outcome. They also serve as infrastructure reserve for civic practices. As seen in Chapter 9,

¹⁴ Groups of consistent daily attendance to show consistency in doing sth.

social interactions quickly shifted into civic talks or mixed with civic talks in public health crisis. Moreover, socializing in online assemblages is a major mean to generate various dimensions of “public,” a topic in Chapter 7.

My ethnographic fieldwork allowed me to observe and hear about creative uses of online assemblages that challenge current literature on collective efforts on social media. For example, multiple respondents said they depended on online assemblages to “supplement” lack of the like-minded, or those in the same situation, in their life. Hu said: “The Internet is almost the sole channel for me to explore interests. It’s almost the sole place where I can share my thoughts, no matter what my interest is. In my real life, it’s very hard to accidentally meet the like-minded. It’s very hard to organize. The Internet is an easy way to meet the like-minded.” For them, online assemblages are (re)organizations of people by interests and are important means to participate in social organizations. I argue that this is a dimension of the civic as fulfilling self-interest via collective efforts and contributing to collective efforts.

Online assemblages are (re)organizations of people by many things according to my data: locations, professions, hobbies, roles, sickness, objectives, aspirations, difficulties, problems, and many more. They are also (re)organizations of people by overcoming the limitations of many things like locations, professions, access to resources and information, limited real-life contacts, and so on. Any aspect in life, out of lack, need, certain circumstance, or even impulse, could be a “trigger” of such (re)organization. These online collective efforts reveal both civic significance of socializing in assemblages and socializing as the means to realize people’s self-fulfilment in forms of self-organization. The civic here is therefore multi-fold. Firstly, the civic is common concern. My respondents showed various common concern in the online assemblages they participated in and even hosted: news; public events; local old building protection; local education; health; old-age life; feminism; to name a few. These common concerns are usually about “big” issues or topics but are often related to my respondents directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly. Secondly, and more often, the civic is common situation. As seen in the examples of creative uses of online assemblages, common situation, whatever the situation may be, is the major “link” in aggregating people and subsequent collective efforts. Thirdly, the civic is self-fulfilment via collective efforts, particularly of the same-minded. Fourthly,

contrary to contemporary conceptualization of "civic" as mainly posited in its contrast with work, domesticity, leisure, and other individual activity (Papacharissi, 2010: 69), the civic I found from my respondents' online assemblage practices trespasses all of them. In the online assemblages, the "civic" is not a sphere separate from other spheres of life. It is in the online assemblage sphere, which will be detailed in the following section, that the multi-dimension of the civic is practiced and explored. That a person's life is stratified into many online assemblages to herd with fellows; supplement, broaden, and extend real-life, and fulfil oneself, is what I said collective life in online assemblages. I use this term to wrap up my respondents' practices in multiple online assemblages.

5.4 Conflicting forces of Online Assemblage Prevalence and Diversity

Collective life enabled by prevalence of online assemblage brings more opportunities and dimensions of the civic life, but this does not necessarily lead to a more intensive and dense civic life. While huge amount and variety of online assemblages are seemingly flourishing across the online world in China, Wang et al (2013) have already noticed scarcity and competition in functions of numerous online assemblages and argued that overlapping memberships caused inter-group competition for people's attention. An ethnographic look with user's perspective at this phenomenon tells a more complicated story about online assemblages. On the one hand, all my respondents showed that they lived a certain degree of collective life, though some used online assemblages heavily and others lightly. On the other hand, such collective life shows such a diversity and complexity that it defies simple theorization. Existing attempts to theorize social media and civic engagement are inclined to emphasize the positive aspect of civic engagement brought by social media uses. Scholarship on social media in China, for example, focuses on the public sphere created by social media uses (Mou, et al., 2013; Jiang, 2014; Dong et al, 2017; Ye et al, 2017) and enabling public and political participation lack in the offline (Jiang, 2014; Wang and Shi, 2018). However, I found from my fieldwork that every attempt to theorize online assemblage participation is conflicted with its opposite. I argue that multiple and diverse uses of online assemblages create kind of

self-conflicting forces. For example, time, attention, and attachment to online assemblages are diluted by participation in multiple online assemblages and much participation is inconsistent, irregular, even random, though such multiple participation supplemented lack of resources or access in corresponding aspects of life. Such conflicts have been picked up by a few researchers, for example, the uncivil behaviours on China's social media (Jiang, 2016) including use of swear words, strong emotional and even irrational comments and posts, etc., and drew attention to the dark side of online participation. My findings go beyond the content of online assemblage interactions and are more in-depth with more diverse configurations, not the "dark side" but conflicting force born with online collective life made up of multiple participation in online assemblages. I argue that such conflicting forces are also a dimension of the civic in the online, contributing to the complexity of the civic and features of the civic in the online. These conflicting forces are seen in informational uses of online assemblages, excessive number of online assemblages, lack of affection in participating online assemblages, moving all social relations to online assemblages, and the Russian Nesting Doll-style layering of online assemblages.

5.4.1 Information Use of Online Assemblages

The use of social media for information is found by many researchers. News sharing on social media is found common on social media (Lee and MA, 2012), so are sharing of tourism information (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014). Civic and political engagement research on social media always relates information to news information (Liu, 2015; Wang and Shi, 2018) or to information addressing social issues (Warren et al, 2014). My findings widely broaden the implication of information. Most respondents said and were observed to use social media assemblages for news. What is new in this respect in my findings is close social networks as major source of news and information, the civic significance of which will be explored in Chapter 7. However, when the majority of respondents said they used online assemblages, strangers assemblages in particular, for information, information here means much more extensively than news information. It meant anything that they did not know or wanted to know and that could be hopefully found online: from practical information like house hunting and

renting to professional knowledge, expertise opinions, and even academic theories. The so-called information covers many aspects of life, and online assemblages become information generation and exchange hub in daily life.

The linking of grouping with other online technologies like searching turns assemblages into important sites and grouping an important form of information seeking and generating. Multiple respondents said they searched online assemblages for information or when they searched information, they saw online assemblages. If useful, they would join. This results in some one-time, irregular, and short-term using of online assemblages. They became inactive or abandoned those assemblages at all after achieving their ends and they searched and joined new assemblages when another life stage started. These appear to be instrumental and utilitarian uses of online assemblages. An in-depth analysis of such use will be seen in Chapter 6.

Older respondents showed relatively longer stay in their online assemblages and less frequency of joining new ones though usually the longer they stayed in a group, the less active they were. The most active participation was usually at the initial stage of joining. The information function of online assemblages becomes an important reason to set up and/or join assemblages but also the reason to leave behind existing assemblages and seek more or other groups.

Information uses of online assemblages implicate a wide range of information and its multiple functions. One function argued in literature is the forming of issue-based groups (Wang and Shi, 2018) with the ones she followed and other followers. What I add to the literature is the strengthening of agency. College students respondents Ji, Dui and Nong reported the importance of online assemblages on their preparation for and application of overseas studies. Online assemblages on Douban, Zhihu, Baidu Tieba and WeChat became important sources of “DIY materials” for choosing desired overseas universities, learning in detail about the universities, researching on the city where the universities are located, learning about life and cost in overseas studies, applying, preparing English test, studying English, packing and seeking travel companions, and even getting airport pick up assistance

from alumni. Ji, a high school graduate then, and Dui, a college graduate, demonstrated extraordinary agency and autonomy to go through such long and tedious process by using online assemblages, online alumni assemblages (of desired overseas universities) and peer assemblages in these cases. Another function is that information seeking sometimes lead to support. I will use the combination of civic virtue and social capital theory to explore mechanisms of such support in Chapter 6.

On the other hand, most information uses are short-term, even temporary. Multiple respondents talked about change of social media platforms and online assemblages for unsatisfied information uses. Moreover, the satisfying of information uses was often achieved by lurking or being inactive. Ji said he did not like speaking in many strangers assemblages that he joined when preparing for overseas studies. Multiple respondents said they would comment on posts but not always. Strangers' assemblages depend on members' "civic virtues" like active participation and active "speaking" for dynamics and longevity to generate more information, bringing civic virtue to the core of online collective efforts.

In summary, information uses of online assemblages is dialectic in several senses. Firstly, on the one hand, these uses result in active searching and using of online assemblages; on the other hand, these uses also result in lurking and temporary instrumental uses of online assemblages. Secondly, that almost anything that can be found online is considered as "information" broadens the range of this concept and expands the uses of online assemblages as means of generating and/or using information. Here is seen a self-sustained circle: searching information sometimes leading joining assemblage, joining interactions there generating content that may become "information" for members and other information searchers, and then the circle works again. Every step in this circle then has civic significance. This turns active uses of online assemblages into a kind of civic virtue since it contributes to information production and sharing, which is considered civic virtue by some (Warren, 2001). However, in my fieldwork, I found that such circle was not so straightforward. It is dependent on other civic virtues like reciprocity to be effective. Furthermore, such circles were seen from my respondents only occasionally, not in every online assemblage they used.

Here appears a conflicting force of extensive information seeking: respondents did not show civic virtues consistently in all online assemblages they participated in. Thirdly, information uses are integrated into other uses of online assemblages. As what I observed and my respondents said, information seeking and sharing were integrated in socializing, communicating, seeking and offering help, comfort, support, resonance, encouragements, and so on. In one word, information is a means of communication in online assemblages. Many online assemblage interactions involve exchanges of information. This, on the one hand, shows that information seeking and sharing become very important reasons for (re)organization of people. On the other hand, it contributes to the lack of affection or tie in most online assemblages, as shown in the coming section. Fourthly, information uses of online assemblages are often reciprocal, though not equally reciprocal. That is, respondents usually left comments or likes or reposts when they browsed online assemblage content for information. Yet, such reciprocity, or content generation, is much less than their uses of information. These features explain the configurations of the civic in online assemblages.

5.4.2 Excessive Online Assemblages and Rare Users

I argue that the easiness and convenience to set up and/or join online assemblages owing to the technological functions of social media platforms and apps make grouping with others such an abundant and even excessive resource that what is relative “rare” becomes users themselves: their time, availability, attention, affection, attachment, and multiplicity of self. This aspect of social media use has little been seen in literature. My respondents showed that on the one hand, they used multiple online assemblages. On the other hand, they were active in very few assemblages once a while. Otherwise, they would feel stressful. Hu said: “Now I can’t do without social media. But at the same time, I feel very stressful. Because I spend too much time on them.” Hu said she has been using social media and online groups for 17 years. “I spend more and more time on them. I become more and more dependent on them,” she said. But when I asked her if she felt more and more close with people in her online groups, she said, “No.” Hu was more and more dependent on social media assemblages but not that much

dependent on specific people in specific assemblages. She roamed from one online assemblage to another and from one social media platform to another. She demonstrated agency and autonomy in “composing” her online collective life by allocating her time and attention to selective online assemblages. As a grassroots online activist which will be depicted in Chapter 8, she was not the same active equally in all online assemblages she participated in. In her account, it was the excessive social media uses that dumbed her passion in people but swelled her interests in information.

Multiple respondents said they were busy and they used social media at leisure time. Xin said: “After I have a job, I have much less chatting. After work I just want to be on my own, browsing what I want to.” The use of social media did not make her more social when her life stage changed.

For most online assemblages, most of my respondents simply lurked and only browsed from time to time or occasionally. Browsing could take several clicks and a quick scanning. Bo said about a large strangers group that he joined: “I browsed its content occasionally when I saw it on the top of my chatting list. If it’s not on the top, I won’t browse it.” Online assemblages “compete” for his attention. Chuan said about the same habit. Very occasionally she would click on the strangers chat groups on her WeChat and had a quick scanning. “To eliminate the red spots of notifications,” she joked.

Participation in online assemblages, then, became as varied as the different degree of importance of each online assemblage for its users. And “importance” of online assemblages is a changing fluidity. The more convenient it is to access online assemblages, the more instrumental online assemblages are for users, and the less users are attached to online assemblages, except family and intimate assemblages. For most of my respondents, online participation is only spare time practices that are further diluted by many assemblages.

5.4.3 Lack of Affection

As mentioned in the introduction chapter, the feeling of community is one of the controversies on using the concept “community” to interpret the civic significance of online gatherings. For example, affective commitment,

important to solidarity and the civic, is found to be a factor influencing ongoing online community participation (Jin et al, 2010). Though the construct of online assemblage is free from such value-laden term as community, I found lack of affective commitment to online assemblages common among my respondents.

Many of my respondents said they did not have affection, attachment, or connection with members of many of their groups, including strangers groups, acquaintance groups, and the groups mixing the above two. This explains their remaining inactive and lurking in many assemblages, and inconsistent participation as well. Alumni groups, which all respondents had, are such kind of assemblages. Most respondents said they did not chat in such online groups. Instead, their alumni groups were usually seen reposted articles of various topics, a point to be picked up in Chapter 7. Bo said he had alumni groups of his high school, of his class at high school, and of his best friends in the class at high school respectively. He said he was active only in the last one. He said about it, "Those in this group are my best friends in the three years at high school. Whatever we have, happy or unhappy, we share here." Whereas for the other two bigger alumni groups, he said, "They basically mean nothing to me. I'm there just for face value." That is, he said, if he was not in the groups, it would appear that he was not a team person. He then said: "It's a kind of network that I establish. It could be that I will use it in the future. It's a kind of, increasing network." For Bo, networking was to keep potentially helpful people in an online assemblage without much interacting with its members. For many respondents, networking was to be in the network without many interactions.

Most respondents said they were not active in strangers online groups either. And they did not intend to be so. Browsing content was usually accidental, and participation in interactions was rare. Shu and Tou used Douban for almost 10 years and have used multiple Douban assemblages. Both said they did not have much interaction with fellow Douban users. Even in the calligraphy Douban group that both joined, they did not think they had much to do with fellow members. "Douban is for leisure," Tou said, "It's for casual chats, to see if there're any like-minded people." He said he followed many people but kept long-term contact with only one. In the calligraphy

Douban group, he sent a post once a month or two months and commented on some posts occasionally. He said he had a few familiar members in this group but he did not have sense of belonging in this group. As for his WeChat chat groups, he said he did very few group chats. "Most of my WeChat chat groups are dead groups," he said. "Online life is not interesting. Real-life activities are interesting," he said, after 10 years of online life. "Online has no texture. I think online is only means to increase network or learning or making friends, or increase convenience of such means," he said. For Tou, online assemblages were necessary supplement to real life limitations, to "increase" access to people and resources, but not useful for socializing with "texture." This finding extends the layers of the "social" of social media.

Many of my respondents said they did not like to "speak" in big groups. In big groups, they usually lurked and "spoke" only when cued. Assemblage size and activeness of participation seem to be related. This raises a question about active members, which I found in all my observing online assemblages, either huge ones like the calligraphy group which said it had more than ninety thousand members, or medium ones with several hundred members, or small ones with a dozen of members. In whatever size of online assemblages, interactions were mainly between active members. Jin et al research on the motivations of members' willingness and continuance to act in online community (2013) and Malinen on the motivations of active participation (2015). Instead, I approach this from civic virtue perspective, which looks at not only intentional practices but also intentional practices with civic consequences. I will see how civic virtue works out for active and consistent participation in online interactions in the following chapters.

Online assemblages were pool of resources of network, socializing, information, and acquaintanceship for my respondents. Yet, they were not keen on many specific assemblages. In other words, they adhered to online grouping instead of online assemblages. As long as it is easy and convenient to set up and/or join online assemblages, it did not matter much who they group with, except intimate relations. As for non-intimate acquaintance, it seems that they were satisfied with being in the same assemblages without many interactions. Networking with strangers and non-

intimate acquaintance does not produce relations, common cause, coherence, and the like with people that can promote consistent participation, but dependence on online grouping.

5.4.4 Movement of All Social Relations to Online Assemblages

Most research on social media is either on people's participation in online communities, or strangers' assemblages, or on how people maintain intimate or personal relations via social media (Chambers, 2013; Baym, 2015).

Limited literature so far researches people's uses of social media assemblages breaking the community-acquaintance boundary. My research fills this gap and I found the movement of all social relations to online assemblages. As will be seen in Chapter 7, the breaking of community-acquaintance boundary brings much more complexity to the conceptualization of the civic.

Two senior respondents Xuan and Wai had least number and variety of online assemblages and used least social media platform in my respondents. WeChat was the only social media platform they used. Xuan described her use of WeChat in the interview as "moving those who used to be in phone book to WeChat Moments, as long as they have WeChat accounts." Among these acquaintance contacts, she said she had more than 20 online assemblages. She said she used WeChat for two purposes: to keep in contact with her contacts and to repost articles. Acquaintance relations become channels for the circulating of non-personal content, which meanwhile becomes the substance to maintain and even "materialize" relationship. This is further explored in Chapter 7.

All rest respondents had similar uses of WeChat, moving most of their real-life social relations to WeChat. Different from the two senior respondents was that rest respondents moved many assemblages with strangers and mix assemblages of acquaintance and strangers to WeChat chat groups too. Gong said: "I have a WeChat chat group. It's a parents group of my child's kindergarten class. Some chat groups are not intentionally set up. A chat group is set up owing to an activity, or any moments." Some respondents set up or joined WeChat chat groups out of moments of mood or passion as well. This appears to be the biggest feature of using WeChat: turning

moment of encounter into fix WeChat contact and moment of encounters or emotion into online assemblages.

With the moving of most real-life social relations onto WeChat, hanging online was not just a leisure activity, as Tou and Annie said about their uses of Douban assemblages whose members were strangers. It is communicating, working, socializing, networking, information seeking all combined, mainly in chat groups and Moments. For most respondents who put some strangers and mix of strangers and acquaintance assemblages together with acquaintance assemblages on WeChat, it is a problem to name their “relationship” with those strangers. Respondents said they did not have any relations with strangers in strangers and mix assemblages. Chuan said about a voucher sharing WeChat chat group in which she had only one acquaintance and the rest were all complete strangers: “It’s voucher sharing relations” with stranger members. Relationship is single, functional, situational, contextual, and “no texture” as said by Tou or “no substance” as said by Ji. What matters is the “content” of online assemblages, not the subjects who produce the content. Stranger assemblage members do not have subjectivity. I wonder if this could be termed a new kind of social relationship: no-subjectivity relationship. Such kind of relationship can generate civic output when members in online assemblages make collective influence. This is to be detailed in Chapter 10.

No-subjectivity relationship was common in previous forum-style and Weibo-style online assemblages but was highlighted in flat-style instantaneous and synchronic chat groups on WeChat. Moving various social relations onto WeChat represents the placing, arranging, rearranging, and organizing of various social relations in various online assemblages all in one platform. This makes several conceptualizations problematic. One is the “space” and particular “public space” metaphor of a particular kind of relationship: civic relationship. What is the relationship between stranger members in strangers chat group? According to what is their relationship defined? The second is the public-private dichotomy of both space and relationship. All social relationship is mediated in online assemblages. It seems that what is important is not “where” relations are and “who” relations are between, but what “content” feeds, fills, or materializes relationships. The concepts of

public and private may be still helpful, but they need to be reconceptualized from new perspectives to be useful in understanding the social reality of prevailing online assemblages. This will be addressed further in Chapter 7.

Moving most social relations onto WeChat is only one portion of online assemblage phenomenon. It is about bringing them into instantaneous, synchronic, communicative, and discursive conditions. Together with other various social media platforms and apps, online assemblages immerse almost every sphere of social life: family, friends, acquaintance, work, classmates and alumni, daily life (e.g. house hunting, house renting), neighbourhood, news reading, information, leisure, hobby, entertainment, studying, business, health, and more. This is what the concept of collective life tries to catch.

5.4.5 Russian Nesting Doll-style Online Assemblages

One consequence of moving onto WeChat is the rearranging of people from other social media platforms to smaller online assemblages. QQ and WeChat group accounts calling for setting up [smaller] chat groups were quite common to see on open social media platforms like Douban, Zhihu, Tianya, and Baidu Tieba, which are termed as online communities. Gong said most of her hobby groups and topics groups moved to WeChat from Douban and Weibo and she used the latter two less. "I now more depend on WeChat chat groups," she said. "It's not to say that hobby and topic groups migrate from Douban and Baidu Tieba to WeChat. People with different preferences go to different places. In Tieba and the like, the scale of chats is bigger, and the coverage is wider. But it's not as in-depth as in the smaller-scale WeChat chat groups." Smaller online assemblages thicken the layers of online collective life from the broad online communities to more nuanced aspect of life and interest groups and bring different civic styles. Gong continued:

"I found once a WeChat chat group has more than 200 members, it turned chaotic. Ideas and opinions conflicted with one another and sometimes there were squabbles. Then those get along well with each other set up a smaller group on WeChat. Anyway, it's so easy to set up WeChat chat group. I think a group under 50 is very good. Dynamics of interaction can be guaranteed."

The homogeneity of online communities has become a concern for Tu (2016). What I found here is more nuanced homogeneity: sameness in ideas

and opinions and avoidance of conflicts and squabbles. Like Gong said, “Small groups are results of eliminating aliens.” I found that it is in these small groups that socializing occurred. As Gong said, in small groups, interest, hobby, and topics groups turned into chat groups.

Gong’s accounts echo my findings: small groups are usually more dynamic than big assemblages and are easily diverted from its original purpose and turned into chat group. Members became acquaintances and chatting was not for discussing or sharing hobby-related content anymore, but for showing and enjoying friendship. Small group members, particularly those separated from bigger ones, had more affection and attachment to the small group.

The members were more familiar with each other and had more continuous bonding between them. They were also more like-minded. The topics were closer to their personal life too. The members usually exposed more private information in such assemblages. There are real “relations” instead of non-subjective relationship. However, it is not necessary that small groups are more social and less civic than big ones. I have not found such evidence in my fieldwork. Instead, when they talked about their life experience, joys and sorrows, I often observed affective or emotional support between members. I wonder if this could be conceptualized as affective or emotional social capital. This will be explored in Chapter 7. Big online assemblages and small ones seem to be different kind of civic spaces.

Participation in multiple online assemblages on different social media platforms results in Russian doll-style online assemblage participation. Any open social media platforms and apps could be the largest doll. These platforms were like recruitment resource pools for smaller assemblages. In the calligraphy group on Douban where I observed, I read from exchanges of comments on one post saying that some best calligraphers in the group had their own chat group. In some reading app and diary app, there were seen QQ and WeChat group accounts calling for setting up chat groups. When users wanted to establish quicker or more in-depth interactions with strangers, they set up/join WeChat and QQ chat groups. Even on WeChat, as seen in Bo’s alumni chat groups and Gong’s hobby chat groups, there were layers of chat groups.

In the layers of online assemblages, the smallest is usually the most and really active ones. And the smallest assemblages were usually family, best friends, intimate acquaintance, and close colleague assemblages. The outer layer the assemblages are located, the less active and involved for most of its members. In the exterior layer, particularly those forum-style assemblages often with hundreds even thousands of members, members did not think they were in an assemblage. Groupness or group consciousness is negatively related to size of assemblages. So does dynamics of many online assemblages. In the calligraphy group that I observed on Douban, it was said on the group information section that there were more than ninety thousand members. But there were a dozen of posts every day throughout the observation period. Comments on most posts were few. Shu and Tou were members of this group and they both sent posts once a month or two months. Tou made comments once a while and Shu did not make any comments, unless he replied several comments on his posts. Shu uploaded pictures of his calligraphy practices to his personal Douban profile almost every day throughout the observation period. But he did not make presence in the group. In the Baidu Tieba group that I observed, there were months of “hibernation” period. These exterior assemblages were rather like assemblages of content. More members browsed posts than sending posts and commenting. This kind of assemblage of content is a kind of settlement though most members were nomads. Or, in the conditions of prevalence of online assemblages, users are all nomads roving in different assemblages. Their resting places are mostly family groups and intimate acquaintance groups. When most social relations are moved online, the intimate relation assemblages become the major anchor of attention and time. This, again, relates to civic virtue in social media time. As argued in Chapter 7 and 8, civic virtue underpins consistent and long-term contributions to strangers’ online assemblages and intimate close groups could be places of civic engagement as well, though in different manners.

The Russian nesting doll pattern of online assemblages somehow mimics real life: family and close intimate relationship are the hard-core, least changeable, and the more distant the relationship it is, the more volatile the relationship is. In the online, the differences are that distant relationship could be as distant as non-subjectivity relationship. In other words, online relationship may be

more scalable. Furthermore, there are more relative positions for users in the larger online scale of relationship. In such relativities, many things are relative. For example, what is public and what is private; what is relations and what is network, what is social and what is civic. Such scalability and relativity thickens the layers of the civic.

5.5 Theorizing

5.5.1 On Self

Current literature on social media seldom look at users as composed of different parts of self or of different selves. Participation in multiple online assemblages highlight this reality which poses question to normative conceptualization of civic virtue. Civic virtue theory is about what a part of self, the part as the citizen, should be. From my findings, I find this understanding problematic, because my respondents demonstrated multiple self in multiple online assemblages. That is, they did not consistently behave the same way in different online assemblages. The multidimensional self has been proposed by Duncan and Burt (1995) who argue the public side and the private side of self, in correspondence with the public concern and self-regard of people. My findings find more complicated self than their depiction. In addition, the public-private dichotomy collapses in online assemblages environment, as suggested in Chapter 7. Each online assemblage is like a scene, each active participation in an online assemblage is like performing a role in the scene. Whether the person demonstrates the private or the public side is up to the scene, or the components of the scene: acquaintance or strangers fellow members, interactive patterns, topics, to name a few. This relates to the concept of “scene style” which attends to different and patterned civic actions in different settings (Lichterman and Eliasoph, 2014). The authors also noticed scene-switching practices which may produce very different civic or even non-civic outcomes (ibid). My findings tell much more diverse and multiple scenes, more social settings, more fluid and even intuitive switching, more ad hoc acts, and more mixed outcomes. Besides, I found both inconsistent and consistent “role-plays” in different scenes. The role I found is defined by distance of relationship with members in the assemblage, degree of importance of the assemblage in “moments” of

respondents' life stage, the performance of fellow members, competitions of other online assemblages, and many other factors. Multiple online assemblages, particularly co-existing on the mobile phone, are like a matrix and respondents "switch" between them. "Switching" role or switching between different self in each online assemblage is a daily practice. This challenges the conceptualizations of civic virtue as dispositions, traits of characters, or capacities to be good citizens or for common good (Dagger, 1997; Kimpell, 2009). In online assemblage practices, some civic virtues are out of dispositions and some other out of habitual practices in different scenes, as will be seen in Chapter 6.

When participating in multiple online assemblages, one's self is stratified into each role, though the stratification is not equal. My observations show that role performance is rather situational, circumstantial, subjective, and reactive. Moreover, the roles are always changing, in parallel with the change of life stages and interests and hobbies, and changes of trendy social media platforms too. Except the two senior respondents, all rest respondents showed migrations of "dominant" social media platform from one to another. Most of them used Weibo for news and opinions when it was most popular before the rise of WeChat. More than half respondents participated in reposting, commenting, and exchanges of comments in terms of public and social events on Weibo then. Weibo earned the name of generating "Internet public event" in its peak time. Less of them do it on Weibo now. Reposting and commenting scatter on more variety of social media platforms and reposting in WeChat Moments is on a wider range of topics. Reposting and commenting have become daily practices, decentralized on multi social media platforms and on larger range of concerns. Civic virtue shown in multiple online assemblages is fluid, inconsistent, unsystematic, and situational. This aspect of configuration of civic virtue has not been covered by any literature.

Multiple role performances in different online assemblages are like multiple presences of multiple self, echoing a myth figure in Chinese culture, Monkey King, who could pull hairs from his body and turn them into many Monkey Kings, himself, with a blow of air. These many Monkey Kings could do identical things but more often behave differently. Social media users usually

behave differently in each online assemblage, reading and discussing social affairs here in this assemblage and chatting gossips in another. Some discuss social and public events in family assemblage, some in colleague assemblage, some in acquaintance assemblages, some in strangers assemblages. Some used to be grassroots activists on Weibo but are indulged in personal hobbies on Douban now. Who is the real Monkey King? Where to look for him? Where to look for citizens in the online assemblages? Those are questions reflected from multiple participation in online assemblages. The implications of these reflections on the practice of citizenship, one of the key questions asked in the Introduction chapter, are argued in the Conclusion chapter.

5.5.2 On Participation

Research on social media usually focuses on participation on one particular social media platform, masking the variety of practices of online assemblage participation. Owing to different role performances, participation in each online assemblage is not the same. Time spent, participating or lurking, interacting or browsing content, activeness, regularity and consistency of participation, staying or quitting, keeping or abandoning the assemblage, all these are different, and in different combinations. It is not only different from assemblage to assemblage, it is also different from person to person, from time to time, from moments to moments, as seen from my respondents. Participating in online assemblages is not *an* act. It is a sphere of life. The most consistent and long-lasting participation is usually in family and intimate friends assemblages. The most active participation could be in any type of online assemblage, though it is always temporary unless it is family and intimate friends assemblages. In certain situationally set up assemblages full of all strangers, participation is almost zero. Such assemblages are usually used as resources of information or reservoirs of networks. The moving online of intimate social relations and the effect of this movement on civic engagement is not researched much. Tu (2016) has noticed the relationship between WeChat, where most intimate relationships are on, and civil society in China and argues that small and close acquaintance circles on WeChat created alternative public spheres by allowing discussions and debates of public issues and social events and

enabled associations between citizens. My findings confirm these arguments and provide more nuanced investigation of civic engagement in acquaintance online assemblages.

Participation is mostly textual, though there are also pictures, audio, video, hyperlinks, and emojis. These modalities of communication almost turn anything into content, “products” of participation. Participation then, is participating the construction of content. Except the content produced with above modalities, there are electric vouchers, electric red pocket, electric lucky draw, and other creative content.

Most participation is interactive, but there are some online assemblages which are set up for non-interactive purposes. In some clocking assemblages, for example, one clocks in the assemblage the same way one clocks on an app. In some assemblage, Chuan said, “You just throw anything you want into it.” Creative uses of online assemblages also create creative participation.

A contact of mine once sent an update on her WeChat Moments, saying: “All those who didn’t keep contact, didn’t leave me memory, didn’t like and didn’t comment, were removed from my contact list.” Liking and commenting, in this case, are means of socializing and participating. So is reposting. Lurking is common in various online assemblages, particularly in open ones on forum and Weibo-style social media platforms and apps. Clicking on posts and comments is taken into statistics as participation. Following and browsing are expected participation too. But lurking is not always tolerated in close assemblages. Yu said he regularly removed lurking members in his chat groups.

Not all means of participation gives users sense of participation. Or, respondents had their own perceptions of participation. Ma said liking a reply on Zhihu to keep it top on the reply list or keep a question top on the front page gave him a sense of participating in an assemblage activity. Chuan said reposting on Weibo gave her a sense of participating in an assemblage. Whereas Hu said commenting on others’ comments gave her such feeling. Participating in online assemblages is participating in a “project” or “corporate” by making contributions to collective efforts. The project or corporate could be a temporary one like trending a post or reply, or a

temporary gathering of people commenting on and exchanging comments on an article, or relatively stable like a hobby assemblage, or reposted article sharing assemblage, or chat group. It is called a project or corporate because people gather together for a common thing, whatever that thing is. And the prevalence of online assemblages in China shows how extensively and plural that thing could be. It is in this sense that participating in online assemblages is kind of civic act, as joining collective efforts. Though such acts are usually sporadic, situational, and inconsistent.

Participation is also practices to express, voice, reply, support, cooperate, interact, or to form habits of depending on such kind of life routine practices. Besides, participation in online assemblages is practices to set up, cognize, and follow rules of each online assemblage, to be explored in Chapter 6.

These nuanced findings of online participation provide useful data in social and civic acts in addition to behavioural research of social media which relies heavily on survey and motivation research on uses of social media.

5.5.3 On the Civic and Civic Virtue

Online grouping as a way of people aggregating and aggregating their efforts is prevalent in China. Such aggregating is mostly grassroots, voluntary, self-organized, collective, and individualistic as well. People gather together online at various moments of their life. They do whatever they can online, with others, via others. They create what they can do online with others.

This large scale of “doing with others” and “being with others” initiated my interest in this study and generated . Tu conceptualizes these phenomena as associations between people (2016) and Schulzke (2011) and Zhang (2014) as associational life. My findings ask questions about what associations refer to. If associations refer to doing collectively with others, then online assemblages are places where people make collective efforts, though many of them are not aware of such collectivity. If associations refer to connections between people while they do things together, then I would say I found very few connections between my respondents and their online assemblages fellow members except in intimate assemblages. If associations refer to being in the same network, then associations were mostly located in online acquaintance networks, those moved online from

offline. For strangers assemblages, my respondents did not show many network intentions unless in professional assemblages. If associations refer to collaborations with others, like Schulzke suggests in online video games players (2011), then I found associational activities only from active participation in online assemblages, mostly in acquaintance online assemblages except some activists to be explored in Chapter 7. As I said earlier, my findings defy single theorization.

Another line of literature is networked individualism. Rainie and Wellman (2012) argue that individuals are networked with other individuals in social networks, particularly in loose and fragmented acquaintance relations, in contrast with social groups, and many aspects of people's needs are met by mobilizing fragmented social networks instead of relying on communities or social groups. My findings echo this argument in the heavy reliance on social media to conduct online life but divert at several points. Firstly, most respondents of mine participated in many strangers' assemblages in addition to acquaintance ones. Secondly, although my respondents had many of their needs met in many online assemblages, they did not often network with individuals in the assemblage, networking in the sense of building meaningful relationship. They used the collective efforts of the whole assemblage as their resources. Even in the case of following individuals as resources, they did not network with such individuals. As found out in Wang and Shi's research (2018), Chinese social media users prefer to follow those who are higher than them in social status instead of following those of the same interest except acquaintance. The followed usually do not interact with their followers (ibid). My respondents' accounts of their social media uses confirmed this finding. Thirdly, the biggest difference is my respondents said they did not intend to keep long-term contact with their online assemblage fellow members unless very rarely they became offline friends. In other words, the term "network" or networking does not mean to turn someone into one's contact but to know where to go to when one has such need.

The findings of participation in multiple assemblages generate the idea that I call online collective life, referring to the way of constantly doing and being with others in multiple online assemblages. With such way of life, many roles

and moments in life become causes of online grouping. Commonness, no matter how trivial, transient, sporadic, and situational, no matter it is seen or unseen, felt or unfelt, online or offline, becomes the tissue to “connect” people into online assemblages. However, most strangers assemblages are connected but without connectedness. In family, intimate acquaintance, and strangers-turned-into-acquaintance assemblages, connection does exist. In certain sense, most strangers online assemblages are like informal, voluntary, self-built, volatile, grassroots commonalities for various purposes, at various sizes, and with various dynamics.

Commonality refers to the fact that people are pulled together and what pulls people to an online assemblage is something in common, just *something*, though that something can be anything. There are usually no common goods, ends, values, obligations, commitments, sense of belonging, and other “grand” things. Commonality also refers to the fact that it is constructed, defined, managed and maintained by voluntary collective efforts, though there are always free riders. Besides, the idea of commonality also means that searching, browsing, joining, setting up online assemblages, and sharing, posting, reposting, liking and commenting become kind of common sense, everyday practices, and way of living in this age. Ordinary people may not always seek connection, or association, or organization in their uses of online assemblages, at least I have not found much of them in the majority of my respondents’ uses of multiple online assemblages. What my respondents sought is being in commonality, though it could be temporary. And they collaborated and cooperated with others, not in all assemblages but in some, to create such commonality in order to realize self-regard purposes including interest and hobbies and multiple selves. I think such massively and voluntarily commonality seeking and building are a kind of grassroots civic. Realizing self-regard purposes through cooperation and collaboration is the key of such civic.

Yet, although online assemblages can be viewed as efforts to create certain kind of commonalities, most of such commonalities are vulnerable and volatile. In some sense, people, particularly the younger generations, use online assemblages as they use consumer products. They select, compare,

try, decide, change, abandon or attach and repeat the process up to complicated interactions of personal and circumstantial conditions. This is the way of online collective life. But this does not mean that there is no civic virtue involved. As suggested in the following chapters, civic virtues play important roles in making these possible.

Online commonalities are sometimes short-lived. Whereas the content people collectively created is long-lived. These contents keep the form of assemblage. They are put into big data and become possible searching results, being picked up again and again.

Online collective life is about constantly constructing commonalities with anonymized others. Commonality is constantly sought and formed; it is also constantly inactive. People who form commonality disintegrate, but the commonality is there, becoming online assemblages of content. Online assemblages of content, those on public social media platforms, becomes resources for online searching. In online collective life, a constantly changing self is constantly grouping with constantly changing anonymized others. One does not want and need to know anonymized others since they know there are always someone there. And the collective efforts they have made will be immortal.

Chapter 6

Civic Virtue and Collective Virtue

6.1 Introduction

This chapter narrows down the argument that multiple online assemblage participation adds complexity and multiplicity to the conceptualization of the civic in the previous chapter. By picking up a dimension of the civic mentioned previously, the civic as contributing to collective efforts that have external good or benefiting others beyond the collective, this chapter looks at social acts and civic virtuous acts out of personal concerns with such civic outcome in online assemblages. I combine civic virtue with social capital theories to bridge the gap between social acts and civic outcomes. I make the following arguments to contribute to the scholarship of both theories: internal good and external good of social capital are bridged in online assemblages which are commonalities; multiplicity of online assemblage participation, habit of reciprocity, and information are social capital in the online in addition to social networks, norm of reciprocity and trustworthy as argued in social capital theory (Putnam, 2000); civic virtues are practiced as social needs are met in online assemblages.

In the following, I first explain why civic virtue and social capital theories fit my findings. I then list my main findings on norms of reciprocity, online help, sharing and mutuality, atmosphere, rule, routine pattern and relate them to literature to unpack nuanced contributions I make. I propose the concept of collective virtue to theorize some social media assemblage practices and explain the main features of the practices that this concept covers. In the end I theorize my findings to see the interactions between the social and the civic.

6.2 Civic Virtue and Social Capital Theories

Except online activism, which will be explored in Chapter 8, most online assemblages that my respondents used are socially formed. That is, my respondents formed and/or participated in online assemblages mainly for meeting self needs including socializing, networking, seeking help, getting useful and practical information, learning knowledge, and so on. Social in this sense refers to satisfying self via being with others. This resonates with the findings that social media users use social media for gratifying social and entertainment needs (Zhang, 2014; Yu, 2016; Pang, 2017; Wang and Shi,

2018). Zhang (2014) argues that web-based backpackers online communities conducted uncontentious online activism in their online group social interactions as well as in their offline civic engagements. Yu (2016) examines the non-political uses of social media in everyday life and argues the emergence of political expression. This chapter follows this line of research and configures the civic of the social in online non-acquaintance assemblages. I use the theory of civic virtue to do this examination. Civic virtue theory is used for two considerations. One is that some researchers, for example, Wang and Shi (2018), mention that the use of social media in issue-based groups is good for civic virtue, but this is taken for granted and not explored. I therefore want to bridge this gap. The second is that I observed and learned from interviews practices of civic virtues in my respondents' use of online assemblages throughout the fieldwork. Therefore, civic virtue theory is relevant. Civic virtue theory is applied critically in this research since, on the one hand, it is a highly contested concept; on the other hand, the media as practice theory framework provides chances to see factors unnoticed in normative civic virtue literature conceptualizing civic virtue as dispositions or traits of characters (Warren, 2001) effective without reflection or conscious thought (Hess, 2016). These factors are where, when, with whom, to do what, in what circumstance and for what purpose that civic virtues are practiced. These factors are particularly outstanding in assemblages. This chapter will put emphasis on looking at the practice of civic virtue in assemblage conditions. Meanwhile, though some of my findings show that civic virtues play important roles in engaging participation, some other findings, for example, the widely seen online help, the emergence of norms from practices of participation, found civic virtue theory inadequate. Therefore, social capital theory is used as a supplementary theory to interpret my data. Social capital theory places emphasis on the civic outcome of social relations, which fit my purpose well since my findings show the intertwining relationship between the social and the civic in online assemblage practices and this will be discussed in the last section of this chapter to broaden understanding of the civic in terms of ordinary people's everyday online assemblage participation.

The applying of the civic virtue theory to data interpretation is not straightforward. As a normative theory, it has as many proponents as critics. Even among those who are "united" by admitting the usefulness of this theory, what are considered civic virtues are highly contested, plural and are associated with multiple concepts, as seen in definition of the term in Chapter 1. In this project, I take this elasticity of this concept and I use media

as practice theory as the empirical standpoints to look at civic virtues practiced in online assemblages.

In introducing his theory of social capital, Putnam argues that social capital is very closely related to civic virtue by saying that social capital “calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations” (2000: 19). He suggests positive relationship between the two concepts. It is not clear whether “reciprocal social relations” in Putnam’s argument refer to either acquaintance relations or strangers’ relations or both—this may not be a question for him since he did not mention it at all. In examining online assemblage participation, however, this is a question. As said in Chapter 5, there is mainly non-subjective relationship between many members in strangers online assemblages. How does civic virtue function in non-subjective relationship, or nominal relationship without relations? No literature has been found to cover this question and my findings of collective virtue bridge the gap. My findings show that apart from some individual’s civic virtues, collective virtue co-produced by individual’s civic virtues, social capital, and social media technological affordances helps the forming, aggregating and sustenance of collective efforts. The conceptualization of collective virtue explicates new form of civicness in online assemblage practices.

The creative uses of online grouping mentioned in Chapter 5 also add complexity to what social capital theory wants to show: “relationships matter” (Field, 2010: 1). When networking and grouping are easy and convenient, how much relationships matter and in what ways relationships matter are the main questions.

6.3 Norms of Reciprocity

Reciprocity, or “exchange between individuals for mutual benefits or for the benefit of a community” (Holton, A. et. al, 2015: 2527) is a meeting point between civic virtue theory and social capital theory. It is considered by some as civic virtue (Warren, 2002: 75) and the norm of reciprocity is an important part of social capital theory together with trust and social networks (Putnam, 2010; Kimpell, 2014). In my fieldwork, respondents talked about and were observed of frequent reciprocal acts either between two members or between non-specific members, though not always. Both reciprocal and non-reciprocal acts were commonly seen. Reciprocity arguably encourages dialogue, engagement and enduring interactions in social media

environment (Holton, A. et. al, 2015: 2530). My findings support this argument. Non-reciprocal acts result in lurkers and inactive participation, and both are unhelpful for the dynamic and sustaining of online assemblages as collective efforts. My findings add to the literature by firstly, arguing that both reciprocal and non-reciprocal acts were situational; and secondly, distinguishing two kinds of reciprocal acts: simultaneous reciprocal acts and translatable reciprocal acts. The former refers to on-site reciprocal acts in interactions in online assemblages and the latter refers to the findings that respondents translated some of their reciprocal acts or habits to another assemblages, situations, social media platforms, or in another time. Each has its own civic outcome.

6.3.1 Simultaneous Reciprocal Acts

In online assemblage, simultaneous reciprocal acts refer to those that give immediate return to content or acts that one benefits. These acts are related to the dynamics of online assemblages. According to what my respondents said in the interviews, they took reciprocal acts for showing courtesy, gratitude, complement, support or opposition, agreement or disagreement, or for special purposes like intentionally trending a reply or post to make it top on front page, and some as habits. Multiple respondents said they commented when they had something to say. The motivations to take reciprocal acts were rather individualistic and situational, usually when they felt stricken either because of resonance or the opposite. No one was found taking reciprocal acts at everything or anybody that they benefited. They always took selective and inconsistent reciprocal acts.

This has two implications. One is that reciprocal acts are taken according to circumstances: factors like where, when, with whom, and what content is involved are related to reciprocal or non-reciprocal acts. For example, some respondents said they relatively took more reciprocal acts in acquaintance groups than in strangers' groups. Reciprocity is a circumstantial civic virtue. Secondly, my respondents used reciprocal acts as meaningful and intentional ones. Like what Tou refuted when I said liking in WeChat was as easy as a click: "Liking in WeChat Moments is not just a click. It shows attention. If it's someone that I don't care, why do I like?" Moreover, they not only took reciprocal acts meaningfully, they also perceived reciprocal acts they received as meaningful. When talking about the comments that he got in Douban calligraphy group, Tou said: "I feel good to be recognized." He took others' reciprocal acts as recognition.

I found that information seeking was a major social media use to generate reciprocal acts. Many respondents said they took reciprocal acts when searching information online and I observed them to do so too: liking, commenting, replying, or reposting. Such reciprocal acts added up to the piling of user-generated-content and to the collective efforts of content development and therefore are civic virtuous. It could be said that social media platforms depend on the reciprocal acts of users to generate content.

Information seeking not only generates civic virtue like reciprocity, but also is part of civic virtue like efficacy. According to Warren, efficacy is the self-confidence and the habit of taking actions to solve problems, usually by taking collective actions (2001: 74). In my findings, information seeking was a habit of my respondents to solve problems by using collective efforts. Nong registered on Zhihu because, she said, "I want to find out some answers here. When I'm confused I will find out answers here." She browsed other's questions and replies to those questions and she asked questions too. She liked some replies to questions of her concern, and she expressed gratitude to those who replied to her questions. "Whether the reply is what I want or not, whether the reply is right or not, I'm very grateful to those who replied, for they answered questions seriously," she said. She also made comments when she had something to say while browsing questions and comments as reciprocal acts. The act of satisfying personal practical need leads to reciprocal acts.

I found that my respondents made comments to express agreement, disagreement, support, comfort, acclamation, confirmation, encouragement, opinion, or ask questions. Occasionally, there were several rounds of comments or more people joined in and commenting became a mini argument or group interaction. For forum-style social media platforms, commenting is an important function to engage participation. Making comments on posts or comments of posts is called block-building and the height of the block tells the popularity of the post. Reciprocity is the major civic virtue contributing to block-building. However, many respondents said such group reciprocal commenting did not make them feel in an assemblage. Ma said about his reciprocal commenting on Zhihu. "I think it's individual act. There is no group formed. At most I have the feeling that we are the same kind of person." This suggests collective efforts without collectivity, or connectivity without connectedness. A bit similarity, or commonality as said in Chapter 5, pulls social media users to aggregate and form collective efforts owing to the civic virtue of reciprocity, but usually

temporarily or transiently. The civic virtue of reciprocity contributes to transient civic engagement in some online assemblages or circumstances. As for those comments or replies which spoke exactly his mind, Ma said: "I feel that there's someone who knows about me. Or I'm not alone. But I don't want to know this person." Here, we see what I termed as non-subjective relationship. What motivate reciprocal acts is self-regard, or narcissism as argued by Weiser (2015). Such acts are not between people as subjects, but between people and the content others create—what I said as assemblage of content in Chapter 5. Both contributing to the same collective efforts and bearing some similarity do not motivate connected relationship between members. For Ma, reciprocal acts were not for networking, but for self-expression, identification and resonance.

The Douban calligraphy group where I observed showed other kinds of simultaneous reciprocal acts. Tou said, and I observed as well, he habitually posted his proud works of calligraphy to the group for evaluations, reviews, and critics. This was a very common practice in this group. I observed many posts with the title "Criticisms invited please" and there were always comments on such posts. Mutual review and critics are kind of group norms or culture. Tou said he always commented on calligraphy works that he thought excellent or by those members that he was familiar with. "When I see excellent calligraphy works, I have heartfelt appreciation, I then comment on them." As for comments on his calligraphy works, he said he would always reply "out of politeness and respect." He always expressed gratitude in his replies to those comments on his works. In the interview, Tou wrapped adherence to group norm and other-regard in self-regard rhetoric. This is partly due to my ethnographic one-on-one interviews when, in order to answer my questions, respondents had to give a "self" explanation to what they had done. The other part is, I argue, self-regard and other-regard are often mixed in online collective efforts, as shown in Tou's mentioning of politeness and respect, arguably civic virtues (Swaine, 2010), as motives of reciprocal acts. This relates to the argument that associational life cultivates civic virtues, politeness and respect among others, and promotes civic engagements (Warren, 2001; Zhang, 2014). Whether online assemblage participation is associational life or not does not matter here, what matters is online collective efforts are similar to associational life in terms of relations to practices of other-regard civic virtues, even without the consciousness of respondents, echoing the disposition conceptualization of civic virtue (Hess, 2016). Being civic without civic awareness, this is what I often found from my respondents. And this is a distinctive feature of the civic in the online.

Expression of gratefulness was commonly seen in this calligraphy group. You said he got familiar with some members via such mutual comments and mutual appreciation day by day. Reciprocal acts become reciprocity norm and become one of the self-sustaining forces of this online assemblage.

I found reciprocity both as dispositions of individuals and as meaningful and intentional ways of doing in online assemblages. I argue that practices of online reciprocal acts are complex and circumstantial and therefore deny simple conceptualization. My respondents showed inconsistent reciprocal acts, which means they were reciprocal in some assemblages but not others; with some members but not others; and at some time but not others. The time-demanding information seeking practices partly contribute to inconsistent reciprocal acts since consistent reciprocal acts reduce the efficiency of information seeking. Therefore, simultaneous inconsistent reciprocal acts together with social media aggregating technologies turn some individual acts into collective efforts and into aggregating of content. These collective efforts and aggregating of content are important in open online assemblages because such aggregating of content becomes component of big data and searching results in datafied society where every online use is datafied (Hintz and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018) and often shared between platforms, as demonstrated in Chapter 9, satisfying information seeking acts of numerous online users. They are also turned into trending mechanism in many social media platforms which have ranking system. Such system turns collective simultaneous reciprocal acts into collective influence as shown in the following section. Civic virtuous acts like reciprocal acts combine with social media technological affordances and create a kind of online civiness termed as collective virtue which will be detailed in the last section of this chapter.

6.3.2 Translatable Reciprocal Acts

Translatable reciprocal acts refer to a kind of online assemblage practices that I found from my respondents: translation of reciprocal acts between groups, platforms, different situations, and time spans. These findings are important because firstly, they pair with the self-conflicting forces of online assemblage participation suggested in Chapter 5: participation in multiple assemblages on the one hand explicate multiplicity and inconsistency of self, resulting in inconsistent civic participation in multiple online assemblages; and on the other hand, connect the multiplicity of self to a certain extent by some translating practices. Secondly, translatable reciprocal acts to some extent supplement the inconsistency in simultaneous reciprocal acts. This

tells the complexity of grassroots online civiness and the promise of such civiness: some civic virtues are transcending and may become consistent practices.

Tou had an example of translation of reciprocal acts between platforms. With his habit of commenting as paying attention, showing care and appreciation in the calligraphy group on Douban, he said he used liking in WeChat Moments to show attention and care too. He showed consistency in making a civic virtuous practice on different platforms. His civic virtue of reciprocity is cross-platforms. This accords with some literature arguing that social media participation cultivates civic skills and virtues (Wang and Shi, 2018). My findings add that these skills and virtues are sometimes translatable from platform to platform.

Ban, on the other hand, provided examples of more diverse translations of reciprocal acts. She said when she suffered from a disease years ago as a university sophomore, she searched online for information about the disease as means to comfort her anxiety and pressure out of ignorance of the disease. She then found while searching a Douban group made up of the patients or ex-patients of the disease and she joined it. "After I joined the group, I spent more time looking at their discussions and rarely joined their discussions. Even so, I felt they were like my friends." She said she got "huge encouragement and psychological support" from such lurking. She then said: "When I recovered, I went to the group to encourage and cheer up peer patients."

Ban returned what she benefited to benefit others. Her experience revealed the "education" and "cultivation" of civic virtue in online assemblages, which "naturally" occurred without top-down and institutional design, a contested topic on plural values, goals, and other aspects of such design (Costa, 2009; Swaine, 2010). Online assemblages are sometimes like grassroots "schools" of civic education and meanwhile they are also venues of civic practices. One feature of such civic schools is self-determined person-tailored education: no two persons have the same education owing to their different participation in different multiple online assemblages and different patterns of participation in each assemblage. Of course, as mentioned in Chapter 5, the civic online is made up of self-conflicting forces. There are conflicts, contradictions, off-set and so on in such schooling. These may lessen the effect of online civic education but will not eliminate it.

Ban's civic virtue of reciprocity were from her being emotionally satisfied of personal need. Civic virtue literature seldom talks about civic virtue

cultivated from emotional satisfaction of personal need or civic virtue as satisfying others' emotional need, though social support theory argues that people get perceived emotional, opinionative, and substantial support in the online (Lai and Yang, 2015). In the study of online support community though, the focus is on individual motivation to provide information and emotional support (Chiu et al, 2015). For Ban, her motivation to "cheer up" anonymous peer patients was reciprocal acts to perceived emotional support she got from other anonymous peer patients. My findings add up to many Western literature on civic virtue which focus on the aspect of civic virtue to be good citizens in democracies, connecting civic virtue with political involvement (Tocqueville, 2002; Dagger, 1997; Warren, 2001; Kimpell, 2009; to name a few). My findings highlight the civic as between citizens in collectives other than political aims. Then perceived emotional aspect of civic virtue generation and cultivation in collectives deserves attention. Very few contemporary literatures connect self with civic virtue, except those tracing Aristotelian style civic virtue (Duncan and Burtt, 1995; Hohonan, 2002: 20-21). Instead, self in various compound words like self-regard, self-interest, selfishness and so on contrast with civic virtue as public-spirited or common good-oriented (Kimpell, 2015). However, my findings show a loose alignment between self-regard or self-motivation and civic virtue, via the reciprocal motivation to reciprocal acts, or at least cultivation or education of civic virtue, as shown in Ban's experience. This is related to literature on interpretations of Tocqueville's argument that enlightened self-interested citizens seek associations, or collective cooperation for better self-interest (Kimpell, 2015). But in my findings, respondents did not show self-interest but self-regard or self-motivation.

The satisfaction of Ban's information and emotional needs was from other group members' "discussions" of the disease, or social interactions. This is what I argue as the intertwining of the social and the civic in online assemblage practices. Social interactions in this patients' assemblage, with or without civic intentions and awareness from respondents, have "civic" outcome on Ban, both providing her with support and encouragement and generating her later reciprocal acts. This is another distinctive feature of online assemblage participation found from my research: social interactions in online assemblages have direct (to its members including active and lurking members) and indirect (to information seekers using online searching) civic outcome. This aspect of the civic will be further explored in Chapter 7.

Years after graduating from university, Ban said she wanted to join some social organizations to remedy the lack of passion to life out of office work. “I think I will have the desire to join Douban group and the like when I want to take part in social organizations,” she said. After so many years, her experience with Douban patients group still has influence on her choices of civic engagement. The links between participation in multiple assemblages over time will be explored in Chapter 8. It is enough here to say that online assemblage participation is found useful in cultivating civic virtues besides practicing them.

Civic virtue of reciprocity is like a basic element common to see and is often combined with other civic virtues to be explored next. It is found to contribute both to repeated but transient and random civic engagement and to more consistent civic performances from my respondents. The former is usually seen from situational simultaneous reciprocal acts and the latter more often from translatable reciprocal acts, or, different outcomes of these two types of reciprocal acts. I found translatable reciprocal acts sometimes configure as simultaneous reciprocal acts in trans-assemblage participation. Both acts are often seen in online help.

6.4 Online Help

Help seeking used to be researched between people (Cross and Borgatti, 2004). In the online, help seeking and offering are usually masked by information seeking and knowledge sharing, both are argued for increasing social capital (Cross and Borgatti, 2004; Hooff and Aukema, 2004; Zúñica et al, 2012). I found many information seeking and sharing acts in my fieldwork. Some of them were out of civic virtue and some out of practical reasons. For example, Hu said she was a feminist and often searched different social media platforms for news, events, writings etc. on feminism shared in online groups in order to be informed, learn, comment, and repost/share. She said she also joined online English study group to improve her English. However, I found more than information seeking and knowledge sharing. There was a broader range of help seeking covering experience (Munar and Jacobson, 2014), emotions, feelings, thoughts, difficulties, confusions, anxieties, and so on that motivated my respondents to turn to online groups for help. This wide range of online help not only increases social capital, but also demonstrates civic virtues and collective virtue, all of which configure the civic of the social interactions. In my fieldwork, many of my respondents told stories of favours they got from their online groups, or perceived help they got from strangers,

and the help they offered to strangers. Online help was the major cause for translatable reciprocal acts that I observed from some of them. The translating practices of my respondents from what they sought into what they offered demonstrated their civic virtue of reciprocity and doing favour, and turned online help a mechanism of turning the social into the civic. In the broader sense, online help is a fabric to weave individual social media users into assemblages, sustain individual's habit of turning the online for help when necessary, and keep online assemblages an active sphere of everyday life.

Dui said she often answered questions on Zhihu about raising pet rabbit because "I think it's good to give a helping hand when the others are helpless. The feeling that other people feel when they are helpless, I have ever felt too." Altruism and empathy motivated her to answer strangers' questions as offering help. Bo had the same motivation when he replied strangers' questions about his university on his Weibo account. He said: "I think everyone has the moment in need of help. And giving a reply needs only a slight effort. It's not demanding at all. I feel good when I can help others. And they may become my friends in real life someday." In addition to empathy and altruism, Bo showed warm-heartedness and networking motivations in his offering online help. Besides, the easiness of providing online help facilitates his helping acts. The easiness of offering online help resembles the "low" effort argument of clicktivism and slacktivism on online political participation which arguably reduce offline political participation (Svensson, 2016). In terms of online help, my findings show that low level efforts facilitate online civic virtuous acts which bring social interactions civic outcome. Dui said in the interview that "handy" online donation apps facilitated her online donation acts.

Online help was frequently seen in active online assemblages I observed. And it usually did not occur between specific members. That is, the help seeker usually did not ask help from any specific member, unless they were very familiar. The request was put forward into the assemblage, and whoever wanted to answer or was available to answer gave reply. Members were always willing to provide help and those who were helped always showed gratitude. The social capital produced via online help was not only for those who received help, but also for the whole assemblage when it became a norm to ask and offer help, to be discussed in the coming section.

When Dui applied for overseas MA studies, she asked questions on Zhihu and some forums for help. Her questions were not simply for information

about foreign universities and programmes, but for suggestions on which university and programmes she should choose. Nong had similar help-seeking in Baidu Tieba. She posted her academic records and asked for evaluation of her chances to be admitted. She sought confirmations of admission chances too. For Dui and Nong, what they sought and expected were not just information and knowledge, but insider guidance, experiences and lessons, confirmations, and peer reassurance and support. Information seeking alone cannot cover their appeals. That is why Dui said she found Zhihu was not as efficient as joining WeChat chat groups and QQ chats groups recommended in Zhihu replies. She meant multiple individual answers she got from Zhihu could not satisfy her as much as what she achieved in synchronous and highly interactive WeChat and QQ group interactions. She said: "When communicating with people in the chat groups, sometimes I felt warm and moved. Some people were really nice. They not only helped me solve problems, they also offered other suggestions and aid. They also encouraged me." Here again, as in Ban's case in the previous section, is seen psychological or emotional effect of social talks with civic outcomes. The civic outcomes come from recipients feeling of being supported, encouraged, and helped. And it is these feelings that contribute to translatable reciprocal acts. As I observed of Nong's participation in Baidu Tieba and Dui's participation in Zhihu, they both answered questions, provided suggestions, and joined short discussions of information exchange. Nong said in the interview about what she did: "I told them whatever I knew." "Them" are fellow members different from those from whom she learned whatever she knew. The sensitivity to "feel" others' goodwill, kindness, warm-heartedness, and so on, or personal interpretation of social interactions, and then to feel grateful for what one feels seems to be a civic virtue in online discursive interaction environment. This civic virtue contributes to reciprocity and the habit of depending on collective efforts for personal problems, increasing efficacy. This habit explains the using of multiple collective efforts that I observed in the fieldwork.

Seeking and offering online help found here are integrated. Norms of reciprocity work rigorously here. And they work in addition to Putnam's proposal of specific reciprocity: I do this for you and you do that for me; and generalized reciprocity, that is, I do this for you with expectations that someone else will do that for me (2000: 20-21). The reciprocity model here is you do this for me and I do that for someone else, to pass the goodwill and help one received. This model of reciprocity is the major part of what I call translatable reciprocal acts. It could be termed translatable reciprocity.

The widespread generalized and translatable reciprocal practices contribute to the non-subjective relationship in online assemblages environment: no specific person and no specific relation is sought after since there is an expectation that there is always someone there to do this for me or to whom I do this for.

Providing help is believed to relate to altruism (Ma and Chan, 2014). From my fieldwork, I observed altruistic acts like Hu's reposting of asking-for-help posts on Weibo and feminism news, events and writings on Douban and Weibo. Altruism, including sharing and mutuality, and norms of reciprocity including translatable reciprocity work together to generate some civic practices in the online.

6.5 Sharing and Mutuality

Sharing is believed to be a civic virtue (Koertge, 2005) and the primary feature of Internet culture (Trottier, 2012; Tierney, 2013; Evans, 2015; Highfield, 2016). It is also argued to be active participation and involving more commitment to participation (Beam et al, 2016). Research on motivations of sharing shows concomitant self-regard motivations like satisfaction and self-efficacy (Jin et al, 2013), entertainment, status seeking (Lee and Ma, 2012) and other-regard motivations like altruism, perceived online attachment and relationship commitment (Ma and Chan, 2014). My findings show that one person not only has different motivations in different online assemblages, some self-regard and some other-regard, but also has different motivations in different time in the same assemblage, echoing argument of the multiplicity of self in Chapter 5. Oh and Syn (2015) relate sharing information, including personal experiences, knowledge and resources, to providing social and emotional support to anonymous others to help them solve problems. My findings echo this argument but further develop it by showing that in many online assemblages, support and help are mutual. The mutuality is not just specifically between provider and receiver, but also generalized and translatable in the senses described above in different type of reciprocity. Furthermore, creative uses of online assemblages produce highly interactive synchronous groups of mutual support and help, for example, clocking group in which each member contributes to form collective efforts and meanwhile using collective efforts for personal benefits as suggested in Chapter 5. Mutual support and help, on which online assemblages are formed and sustained, are civic, but respondents usually have clear, sometimes temporary, utilitarian uses of

such assemblages. These practices, another configuration of collective virtue, blur the theoretical line between the civic and the social and show a model of “harmonizing” the two.

Hu’s house renting online assemblage is an example, which is made up of flat owners and tenants. “The strange thing is that this is a private group,” she said, referring to the fact that this group was a close one on WeChat. She continued:

“This group is not set up by real estate agents. We hate real estate agents. This is a savagely growing group. We share all kinds of information. People indeed help each other here...There is much useful information. When I just came here, I wanted to rent a flat, I searched this group. People discuss in this group politely, very nice. We are not friends. We just help each other. We just share information. Just this. Sometimes people make suggestions.”

The assemblage is a visible mechanism which bridges needs of the supply and the demand between anonymous strangers. And this mechanism is feasible out of sharing information as help by self-organization of people. This is another kind of “the social becomes the civic” in the sense that social demand and supply were brokered in the form of sharing and mutual help. As compared with the psychological support that Ban and Dui received mentioned earlier, this kind of help is tangible. This makes the assemblage a kind of social network that social capital theory argues. However, members in this network did not have even weak ties. They were basically anonymous for each other before they became pairs of landlords and tenants. The social capital is not produced by relationship between people in this network, but by being in a network of collective efforts: sharing of information as concrete mutual help. The social capital is not produced by relationship in a network, but by collectively forming, being, and contributing to a network. In other word, Hu did not come to the assemblage for networking with individuals, relationship did not matter here. Online collective sharing matters. The social capital she had was not generated by her relationship with anyone but by her being in this assemblage or network. This is a kind of online collective sharing as online social capital, found as a supplement to Faucher’s (2018) Marxist conceptualization of online social capital which focuses on using individual and collective online social capital as a deliberate strategy by major social media networks to encourage participation for profit and as new way of exploitation of individual social media users. Faucher’s argument is

from a bigger political economic perspective whereas my findings are from a nuanced look at individual-level online sharing and help.

Hu said she did not quit the assemblage after she rented flat from information in it. "I lurk in the group because many of my friends live in this area. They might need renting flat. I have helped some friends rent flats in this group." Hu bridged online help with offline help by being a broker. She brokered online social capital with offline one. Against arguments of online sharing for perceived online attachment and online relationship commitment (Ma and Chan, 2014), Hu shared and stayed in this group for personal need and civic virtuous intention as well. This online assemblage is a place where personal need and civic virtue of sharing are harmonized to certain extent.

In my fieldwork, I found creative online sharing practices that raise questions on theorizing of these practices. For example, Chuan's voucher sharing WeChat group. When she joined it, there were around 100 members. Later it developed into a big group with 500 members, the limit of WeChat chat group. "Coupons for take-aways, taxis, and the like are shared here. Some vouchers are valid only when you repost them. Whoever have such kind of vouchers just repost them here," she said. And there are many kinds of sharing assemblages like this: online shops links, group purchase, discount information, lottery sharing, advertisements sharing, and so on. Many of these assemblages are voluntarily set up to deal with promotional activities and advertisements. As Chuan said, these groups were set up to "throw" promotional links and advertisements into. Members shared such things primarily for gaining personal benefit of discount. Faucher's Marxist perspective on online social capital may be extended to the exploitation of sharing and help in online social network as means of marketing by firms and businesses. Though in the clocking groups mentioned in chapter 5 which were popular on WeChat, members used collective clocking in an assemblage as a kind of support to self-discipline. Sharing and help practices in online assemblages anchor a nexus of different practices.

In online assemblages, sharing out of the willingness of someone to share became help for those in need. Or, where such translation occurs becomes online assemblage. Civic virtuous acts like sharing and reciprocity are coherence of online assemblages of people and content.

However, creative sharing practices in the above-mentioned online assemblages seem to raise question on "sharing what can be considered civic virtue and social capital." There is no literature on such creative practices yet. For my respondents, such sharing has pragmatic uses.

Though there are commercial uses of networking function of social media assemblages.

Another findings that my research adds to the literature are the civic outcome of sharing of personal mind. Personal mind covers a wide range of content as observed from my respondents: from personal mood, state of mind, thoughts, experience, eyewitnesses, to personal understandings, reflections, and so on. All my respondents habitually shared their mind here or there in their multiple online assemblages: emotional moments in life; excitement and sadness; complaints and angers; travels and cooking; kids (for parent respondents) and pets; reading and studying; and so on. I observed this kind of sharing on WeChat Moments, Douban groups, Zhihu replies, Weibo posts, Baidu Tieba, and WeChat and QQ strangers chats groups. Some said they did these on Danmu¹⁵ of Video sharing sites and on music apps too. Personal mind, either responsive or initiative, became wide range of accessible content in social media open and close assemblages in the form of assemblages of hobby, topic, casual chat, and transient assemblages. These contents became the “blood” for the life of the big majority of major social media platforms like Douban, Zhihu, Weibo, Baidu Tieba, WeChat, and QQ, and for search engine as well. The willingness to share personal mind and the habits to do it for long term, particularly in anonymous strangers’ open assemblages, became a very important collective virtue for the altruistic outcome and socializing function of such willingness. Many online assemblages exist and sustain based on such altruistic outcome and socializing function.

I observed Ma described in detail his state of mind in depression when answering the question on Zhihu “How does it feel like in depression.” Fa wrote Douban diary about her overseas travel, study life, and experience. Bo and Xin sent their complaints and bad mood on Weibo accounts. And members in a fans assemblage and in Yu’s QQ chat group chatted daily their personal feelings and experience. In open online assemblages, contents of personal mind were sometimes reposted. One of my WeChat contacts once sent a screenshot about a Douban group whose title was “Staying Home Self-help Alliance” to show amazement about such an assemblage. The group descriptions said those who were afraid of or dislike socializing could join this group and the members sent various posts in the group, from asking for girlfriend to asking how to overcome fear of

¹⁵ Comments moving one after another on screen of video.

socializing. Many posts were about why the senders stayed at home without going to work and about their state of mind. They stated legitimacy of their lifestyle and sought support from peers.

Online assemblages sharing various “things” mostly out of self-regard were often found to provide mutual help and support to members and to information seekers as well, forming collective virtue and increasing both social capital for members, for assemblages, and for outsiders.

6.6 Self-regard Act and Collective Virtue

As mentioned in previous section, self-regard is the major motivations for online community activities and social media uses both in social acts like entertainment and satisfying needs (Yu, 2016; Wang and Shi, 2018) and in civic engagement like news sharing (Lee and Ma, 2012). What I add here is the findings of several factors that give online self-regard personal acts civic significance, like those seen in reciprocal acts including sharing and online help.

Shu has used Douban for more than 10 years. Throughout the observation period, he was inactive in the calligraphy group, where I recruited him. But he was very active in his own Douban account. He uploaded pictures of his calligraphy practices almost every day. His updates on book reading were observed from time to time. As seen in the past record of his Douban account, he was always active in his private space but had few interactions with other account holders.

Shu said about his use of Douban: “I use Douban simply as a tool of keeping record of books that I read. Every time I finish reading a book, I make a record on Douban. I mark the record by grading it. Then Douban will recommend books according to my preference. Later, I clock daily on it my calligraphy practices. I keep a record of what I learn each day. I take it as self-supervised learning.” Clocking, for Shu, was uploading pictures of calligraphy work. It was like keeping diary in a different mode. This relates to Marwick and boyd’s (2010) research which argues the use of Twitter as a diary or record of their life reflected that users took Twitter as a personal space. My findings add three factors to this argument: personal-motivation, time, and consistency. Shu’s using of Douban as a personal space out of self-motivation has been lasting for many years. His consistently grading books after reading has lasted for many years too.

Millions of Douban users who have the consistent habit of grading for years turn Douban into China's top social media platform on grading of movies, books, music and soup operas home and abroad. "Checking Douban grading" has become a mundane practice for many young people to choose movies to watch and books to read. Multiple respondents said they used Douban grading for choosing of books or movies, including Shu. They were also observed to grade books, movies, or soup operas on their Douban private accounts, though none was as long-lasting and consistent as Shu.

Douban grading is a good example to see how individual act with personal motivation are accumulated into collective influence on social media which brings civic outcome, and commercial value too. Because of such civic outcome of collective influence, Shu's consistent and long-term private motivational act seems to be "virtuous." I call these aggregating of personal acts with "virtuous effect" collective virtue. These personal acts may not be civic virtuous acts per se, but appear to be virtuous in collective context with the aggregating technology of social media. The virtuous effect is out of the effect of collective efforts of aggregated personal acts on each individual. To be more exact, collective virtue is the virtuous effect or outcome of collective efforts. It is the civic outcome of unintentional and unconscious collectivity.

The same phenomenon was seen in Douban users' updating of their profiles with their own writings including diaries, reviews, opinion, commentary and analysis on various topics, reposted articles, and pictures, like in Shu's case. Multiple respondents said they browsed Douban users' profiles a lot. And I observed the same. By browsing their Douban profiles, I saw many "traces" of their browsing: favourites, likings, reposts, comments, etc. Annie and Fa kept many favourite writings from Douban users' updates in a long list of folders as archives. Personal acts of updating profiles become collective virtue providing information and knowledge for anonymous others.

Shu's case highlights the factors giving civic significance to online self-regard personal acts: social media technological affordance, time, and consistency. The latter two are related since consistency implies length of time in contrast to temporality. Time also refers to amount of time. These factors which have an effect in seemingly virtuous habit raise questions about their roles in thinking about civic virtue on social media online assemblages. Normative civic virtue literature conceptualizing civic virtue as dispositions or traits of characters neglect such factors like time and circumstance in the practicing of civic virtue in real conditions. It is assumed normatively that people with civic virtues behave the same civic virtuous way

anywhere anytime. This is not what I saw in participation in multiple online assemblages. As argued in Chapter 5, respondents practiced civic virtues, circumstantially, inconsistently, even randomly, in different online assemblages. Therefore, consistency has two dimensions: consistency as acting the same way across different online assemblages and consistency as acting repeatedly in one act, as seen in Shu's case. The former is related to "setting" factor mentioned in Chapter 5 and the latter is related to "time" factor.

I did not see consistency across different online assemblages in my fieldwork. Respondents reported and I observed some different patterns of participation in different assemblages. For example, Hu was an online activist on Weibo, as to be seen in Chapter 8, but she lurked in many WeChat chat groups of which she was a member. While Ji said he lurked in many WeChat groups that he joined for various practical needs, he said he was very active in talking about news and current affairs in best friends' chat group. What I found most is consistent uses of online assemblages, for some respondents consistent using one after another assemblages, in many aspects of life.

6.7 Atmosphere, Rule, Routine Pattern and Collective Virtue

Except unorganized transient gathering of people, for example, those who answered the same question on Zhihu or trending the same post on Weibo, there are many long-term assemblages on various social media platforms and how and why these assemblages sustain become a research topic. In online community studies, sustenance is called community continuance and the research focus is on the motivation of persistent individual volunteer contribution (Jin et al, 2013) and the motivations of online community commitment (Zhou and Amin, 2014) or affiliation (Yang et al, 2016). It is already mentioned above that this research focuses on exploring individual users' motivation. My research provides a different perspective by looking at the role of collective efforts in sustaining the assemblage, that is, assemblage atmosphere, rule, and routine pattern.

Assemblage atmosphere emerged in my data according to my interviews and observations. Atmosphere of online assemblage or online community has been attended by very few researchers. It was briefly argued in an empirical research on Facebook group dynamics that collaborative atmosphere of the group contributed to group participation and engagement (Muls, et al 2019: 170). The concept of digital atmosphere was brought

forward to argue the affective power of social media in shaping practices (Tucker and Goodings, 2017). My findings add up to atmosphere research that positive atmosphere of an assemblage is the configurations of collective virtue out of members' long-term collective interactions and is training ground for civic virtues. Assemblage atmosphere is conceptualized as perceptions of members on the characteristics of the average practices in the assemblage.

Chuan said in the interview: "You are aware of what the people are like in the group. Then you think about what you should do. If you compare with offline situation, that is, how you behave and present yourself in a certain offline occasion, it's the same." In comparing online and offline participation of group activities, Chuan suggested that online assemblage interactions were "occasions" with settings or scene styles as suggested in Chapter 5 and she pointed out awareness of such settings and awareness of behaving accordingly. She further illustrated by talking about her WeChat chat group made up of buyers of abnormal sizes of bras where members supported and comforted each other, by saying: "You know the atmosphere of the group. This is an all-women group, so there are talks on very private issues. You know it's allowed to talk about very private issues. You won't feel unsafe. You won't feel an alien. Everyone is like this, sending personal pictures, and the like. It's an atmosphere constructed by everyone collectively. The rule is this. You either keep silent, or you speak in this way."

Here Chuan talked about several things: sensitivity to setting or scene as mentioned earlier in the chapter as other-awareness; adjustment of self and behaving accordingly; participation as conformity to collectivity and lurking as non-conformity; inclusiveness and exclusiveness function of atmosphere; collective construction of atmosphere; intertwining of assemblage atmosphere and rule; and rule forming in online assemblages.

Other-awareness, self-adjustment and conformity to collectivity are important components of the concept of civic virtue as the basics of the forming and perception of common good in republican wording (Warren, 2001). These factors are believed to help citizens out of being preoccupied with self-regard and private concern (ibid). What I found here, and everywhere in my fieldwork of ordinary people's use of social media assemblages, was social engagement out of self-regard and personal interest, which, as shown here, can also generate civic virtues. Though, as pointed out earlier, factors like time, sensitivity, and consistency must work together. Besides, according to my observations, the co-working of personal motives, civic virtues, and

assemblage atmosphere best engage participation. The generation of civic virtue by taking part in social interactions, particularly in voluntary associations, is an important point of Tocqueville's (2002) observation of American style democracy and important argument of social capital theory as well (Putnam, 2000). Sensing and following online assemblage's atmosphere are means to generate civic virtues.

However, assemblage atmospheres are not necessarily good. Hu described the atmospheres of some online assemblages she participated in as "warm", "people were polite", and "members were striving to create a friendly atmosphere", whereas others as "people were aggressive". In the online assemblages that I observed, some were chatty, cosy while some were silent without interactions but reposts only. Multiple members mentioned the change of atmosphere in the online assemblages they participated in which drove them away from such assemblages. Assemblage atmosphere could be training ground for civic virtues, it could also be exclusive. Members who do not like or are not used to atmosphere of an assemblage have to "keep silent," as Chuan said, or leave. These echo arguments of dark side of social capital, like homogeneity, exclusion, excessive in-group trust leading economic failure, inequality, and so on (Putnam, 2000; Field, 2003; Portes, 2014). These findings keep me alert from romanticising the construct of online assemblage and the concept of civic virtue, as Fine's (1997) warning of romanticising the concept of civil society. Not all online assemblages are necessarily good for the society, nor for individual members. And civic virtue practiced in online assemblages is not necessarily good for the society, as seen in the above argument about social capital. Besides, these findings explicate the weaknesses of media as practice theory: empirical perspective without ethics. I am well aware of these weaknesses as limitations of my research and take a remedy by proposing normatively "external good" to the conceptualization of the civic online.

6.8 Features of Collective Virtue

For individual respondent, some online assemblages may be a kind of tools to achieve personal ends or to satisfy personal needs. Yet, such achievements were made through collective efforts involving some cooperation, collaboration, willingness to share, good wills, respect, courtesy, rule conformity, debate, mutual help, reciprocity, sharing, trust, information seeking, rational discussion, and so on, those that are termed as

civic virtues by some theorists (Warren, 2001; Koertge, 2005; Trottier, 2012; Tierney, 2013). It is not that every assemblage had seen all those virtues. Nor is it that every member demonstrated all of them. It is even not that one individual demonstrated one or several virtues consistently in every assemblage she joined. Besides, some virtuous acts may not be out of users' own intentions and consciousness. "Seeming virtuous acts" are collective self-interested-driven acts which have altruistic consequence. Such acts are generated and practiced in interactions with others in assemblage environment. And they are open for others' access and use.

Collective virtues, in certain sense, are possible out of people's looking outward for supports, help, supervision, discipline, resonance, exchanges of ideas, mental or psychological rapport, collision of thoughts, cooperation, or in a Chinese meme, "hugging together for warmth." In this sense, collective virtue is primarily social. They are made or facilitated in and only in assemblages or assemblage interactions and activities. In fact, social acts are common to all online assemblages that I observed: greeting, chatting, gossiping, joking, teasing, complaining, praising, complementing, disclosing private information, asking, answering, comforting, encouraging, caring for the other, and the like. In Baidu Tieba and Douban Group, such social acts were seen in comments. There were only more than 200 posts in the university group which I observed on Baidu Tieba, but there were more than 2000 "updates" according to the statistics shown on the group webpage, which means that more interactions were made in the comment section. Seeking help, information, advices and support and offering them were made much like social acts. Or, they *are* social acts. It is theorists who think such social acts virtuous civically because they are altruistic. Collective virtues are personal social acts that have altruistic effect.

Virtuous social acts and non-virtuous social acts, or purely social acts, mix in online assemblage interactions. There are certain "chemical reactions" between them. That is, virtuous acts introduce non-virtuous ones and vice versa. In other words, they are stimulus-responses to each other. It is some features of social media technologies that mutate such mix into a kind of seeming civic acts: searching, selecting, joining, and/or setting up online assemblages as means to seek information and knowledge, seek help and support, flock to the like-minded, satisfy personal needs, solve personal problems etc; participating in online assemblages interactions to "materialize" above intentions; maintaining the ongoing of the online

assemblages by repeated or active participation. These seeming civic acts are mostly discursive and are widely seen in online assemblage interactions. They are seeming civic because they produce collective virtues listed above.

The most important social media technologies that contribute to collective virtue is searching technologies which turn open access content into searching results. Searching technologies are not only made available by searching engines website, but also by searching services in each social media platform. Such searching services, big data involved, turn group content into resources of useful information, opinions, advices, explanations, answers, support of like-mindedness, and more. Multiple respondents said that they used searching engine and online assemblages became search results. There are open access chat groups available. WeChat provides searching service too. It is not chat group content that can be searched, it is the public accounts. When the desired public account is searched, one can subscribe and then communicate directly with the public account holder. If the holder has WeChat chat groups, then one can ask to be invited. Moreover, when technologies do not allow access to close group content, people step in. In Zhihu replies, Douban groups, Baidu Tieba, and Weibo, the so-called public platforms, WeChat and QQ chat group account numbers could be found everywhere. Some social media users long for inviting strangers into close assemblages with instantaneous and synchronic interactions.

Collective virtue highlights not only the networked individuals, or networked individualism (Rainie and Wellman, 2012: 1) in the social media age. It also highlights the connectedness of networked individuals. Yet, such connectedness does not have connection. In other words, individuals are not connected to each other. They are instead connected to technology-afforded collectives. Such collective is the channel between individuals. In this sense, online assemblages can be analogue with public squares. Or, to be more exact, social media platforms are like public squares. Online assemblages then, are the groups of crowds in public squares. The difference is that online assemblages are cooperatively produced crowds. There are interactions (some assemblages do not have interactions), rules, and routine patterns in each crowd. And they are as inconstant and changing as real crowd. Furthermore, an individual is simultaneously in several or even many crowds. And it is highly possible that they behave differently in each crowd. The technologies that allow the simultaneous presence of an individual in different online assemblages produce a mirage of booming crowds. The rule

of the thumb of each crowd is “showing one and only one aspect of you” in each crowd. In this sense, each online assemblage generates or realizes one aspect of “self” or a role of self. It is networked self in multiple collectives.

Public square, or physical space, is argued by some as an important condition in Western democracy (Parkinson, 2012). Social media platforms are argued by many as public space in China (Mou, et al., 2013; Jiang, 2014; Dong et al, 2017; Ye et al, 2017; Shao and Wang, 2017) and in the West (Tierney, 2013). My findings suggest that the so-called personal social media platforms WeChat and QQ also have such public space. They may be called public space in private spheres. My findings also suggest that people used public space, or public spaces, collectively in their own way. And public space or spaces here are mainly locations that people have moments of online collective life.

Another technological feature of such online assemblages or online crowds that I found is that, different from real-life crowds, the crowds or the assemblages did not really disappear. Those crowds that were “dead” became ghost assemblages, or assemblages of content. Even no members came to these assemblages any more, they were still there, online, showing up as searching results and might be browsed, commented, or even revived. This was seen in the university assemblage on Baidu Tieba. Certain members came back to the assemblage several years later when someone asked questions in the comment to the post that those members sent years ago. They came back to answer the questions. And several of them left their WeChat chat group accounts. The same returning was seen in Douban calligraphy group too.

The collective virtue conceptualized here are generated and practised by individuals in interactions or non-interactive interactions in assemblages. Individuals may shuttle between assemblages and social media platforms, or hop from one assemblage to another, but they left behind them content of interactions and they were constantly producing new interactions. There were many traces of individual civic virtues found in my respondents. Yet, their civic virtues were not consistent to be found in any assemblage they are in (though I could not join every assemblage that my respondents were involved in, I learned this from interviews). Nor were their civic virtues always consistent in one assemblage. Such fragmented, and usually circumstantial practices of civic virtue are part of collective virtue. Collective virtue is more about the seeming virtuous “effect” or configurations of social acts: chatting,

discussing, exchanging, sharing and so on, and searching, posting, reposting, commenting, liking and the like. Like what Yu once said in his QQ chat group when he tried to calm down two arguing members: “If you have any opinion to express, go to Weibo to find those like yours. Like them or comment on them and you make contributions. There’s no use trying to persuade each other here.” What he suggested is that liking and commenting on Weibo make contributions to collective political expressive participation (Wang and Shi, 2018). Participating in online assemblages and interacting in them make contributions to such collective virtue.

Technologies play a role in the forming of collective virtue. Technologies are like catchers, collectors, aggregators and amplifiers of fragmented and circumstantial civic virtuous acts as well as prevalent social acts in online assemblages or in online assemblage environment and turn them useful. Individuals may or may not be consistent in their virtuous or non-virtuous acts, that is up to long-term research beyond the scope of this project, but the technologies and uses of such technologies are already genes of current social life.

6.9 Theorizing

The conceptualization of collective virtue is an effort to theorize findings from fieldwork data: self-motivated individual social acts were generated and turned into collective efforts with collective influence, big or small, internally on members and/or externally on non-members. In social capital theory, such influence is called internal good and public good (Putnam, 2000). I argue that internal good and external good are bridged in online assemblages. That is, individual users realize individual purposes or interests using online assemblages through which collective efforts are made and collective virtue emerge. This is possible because online assemblages are commonalities, even of the most minute aspect or moment of life. Online assemblage is a space where common good emerges, though this kind of common good is minute and the size of the common is minute too. This conceptualization reflects the motivation of setting up, joining, and interacting in online assemblages under individual perspective. It is bottom-up, voluntary, autonomous, and grassroots.

In daily practices in online assemblage, collective virtue is often sporadic, random, ad hoc, transient, circumstantial, informal, and not so significant. Its significance explicates in public event, to be seen in Chapter 9. Its explication in public event in turn explicates its significance in daily time: a

kind of infrastructure of channels of mobilization which may be quickly mobilized in “right” circumstances. Collective virtue is standby for being mobilized when the right circumstance arrives. Numerous social acts of online assemblage searching and setting up as well as chatting are something like lubricants to keep the infrastructure ready to function at any time. As the Chinese saying goes: Armies to be maintained for a thousand days but to be used in the nick of time. In relation to big internet event, everyday social acts are like maintenance of the infrastructure. In other word, the social is the standby of the civic in social media age.

Collective virtue is used to summarize the abstract “goodness” of using online assemblages, on the one hand, to satisfy individual interest and need; on the other hand, to generate civic outcome of collectives of individual-oriented acts. Such goodness has some resonance with the concept “social capital,” which argues that relationships bring benefits both to individuals who establish relationships with others and to the society in general, for example, education, (Coleman, 1988); and democracy (Putnam, 2000 Halpern, 2005). The two sides of social capital theory is argued in two strands of research: one focusing on “how individuals using resources available in their network of personal contacts to achieve personal goals” and the other on “the utility of networks for collective endeavours, including participation in civic and political groups” (Zúñica et al, 2012: 320). Collective virtue has these two sides too. The difference lies in the construct of online assemblage which takes online grouping technologies as an actor in generating resources, together with individuals and their assemblages. In other words, online assemblage is like a mechanism to aggregate and multiply individual effort. The politically public good of online assemblages were seen in activists’ civic and political participation to be explored in Chapter 8 and the Internet public events to be unpacked in Chapter 9. In daily time, such “public” good is no more than benefiting a collective of individuals, or even a collective of single selves of individuals, in terms of fragmented needs and moments in life. Technology-enabled online get-together can make and sustain daily interactions between members owing to combinations of active members’ civic virtue and generally generated collective. But such online get-together cannot generate connections strong enough to hold them together, to let them feel related to each other. This is not only because such interactions are not embodied, but also because many of such interactions are not irreplaceable. The resources of networks are always “out there,” online, on various social media platforms and apps. As suggested in Chapter 5, the roaming nomads of social media age

consistently move from one assemblage to another without knitting her own network of stable contacts. Yet, such online get-together can be mobilized, discursively, in “right” circumstances. It seems that people rely on social media platforms or online assemblages, not on each other. Relationship in online assemblages is not mainly ties between people, but channel of communication between people. Social media platforms or assemblages on them become the “media” of social capital. Social media technologies are vital for such online virtue and social capital.

In addition to modify “relationship” or social networks in social capital theory, my findings also make contributions to the theory by showing information and psychological support as social capital. Social capital theory values trustworthiness as an important social capital because it lubricates social life (Putnam, 2000:18). My findings do not highlight if civic virtuous acts and collective virtue enhance trustworthiness between users in online assemblages but I found that information, owing to its variety, is the main use of online assemblages.

The conceptualization of collective virtue is an effort to theorize the civic of the social, the same as social capital theory. In their argument of conceptualizing the civic as civic action, Lichterman and Eliasoph (2014) suggest that before their research many researchers “seek” civic engagement in sectors like voluntary associations, and their proposal of civic as civic action broke such frame and attended to practices, or civic actions, per se. However, their ethnographic cases based on which they developed their argument were advocacy groups and youth volunteer project, the “accused-of” sector of voluntary association that social capital theory also looks at. My ethnographic work, I argue, continues their proposal to “seek” the civic not from sector but from practices and really broke the sector frame by examining prevalent, ordinary, and everyday online assemblage participation. I “seek” the civic from the daily social interactions on the social media. And I found in social media assemblage practices, the concepts of the social and the civic are like two ends of a linear line and practices move fluidly between the two ends. What is considered the social and the civic is not just from sector, venues or locations (e.g. political discussion groups or forums), content (news, public issues, public concerns, etc.), who the respondents are (e.g. professional, organizational, and grassroots civic activists), but also from the civic outcomes of many social acts in which civic virtues are practiced as social needs are met. As seen in the argument of online assemblage in this chapter, it is the mechanism that turn the social

into the civic, or collective social acts with civic outcomes. And the civic conceptualized this way is the nominal relationship between people.

This chapter uses civic virtue and social capital theories to examine the civic of the social, or social acts with civic outcome detected in online non-acquaintance assemblages. The so-called social acts are mostly self-regard, self-interested, self-motivated, self-fulfilling, and self-concerned. The civic outcome refers to firstly, the collective virtue, or the help that aggregating of self-initiated acts have on other social media users; secondly, the norms of reciprocity, rule forming and binding; and thirdly, the online help directly or indirectly between online assemblage users. The civic then refers to both help between non-acquaintance users and some shared norms between them. With such civic outcome, online assemblages participation creates kind of “externalities” or “public good” of social capital that arguably benefit the society in general, for example, making society more efficient and generating economic opportunities, mutual support, cooperation of mutual benefit, etc. (Putnam, 2000). My findings echo social capital theory but meanwhile adding two points: firstly, the indispensable “actor” of social media technologies integrated into online assemblages; and secondly, what matters is not relationship in terms of ties or affectionate connections between people, but being constantly connected to online assemblages.

Chapter 7

Intertwining of Public and Private Dimensions

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter uses civic virtue and social capital theories to examine the civic of the social, or social acts with civic outcome detected in online non-acquaintance assemblages. This chapter continues examining more nuanced and complex entwining of the social and the civic reflected from my findings in closed assemblages. The prevalence of closed online assemblages on China's top two social media platforms WeChat and QQ make them the most popular sites of online assemblage participation and the most dynamic for most of my respondents. Closed assemblages on WeChat and QQ are considered as private groups by some because they are inaccessible without invitation and permission and there are many closed-circle groups build on real-life interactions and social networks (Tu, 2016; Wang et al, 2019). However, this is a dated conceptualization of WeChat and QQ because I found that closed assemblages on the two include both non-acquaintance and acquaintance assemblages, a distinction based on the division between public and private spheres. To examine the civic practices on social media assemblages, public and private are unavoidable concepts. The relationship between the civic and the social is parallel with the public and the private. I argue that the complexity and multiplicity of online assemblage participation configure more nuanced dimensions of the public and the private, trigger more nuanced interactions of those dimensions, demonstrate further the embeddedness of the setting of the civic in the social, and therefore relocate our attention to explore civic engagement in everyday life.

Next, I first review briefly literature on dimensions of public and private and collapse of public and private in social media. Then I move on to analysis of findings on creating online acquaintanceship as a cause, reposting, and political talk in intimate close-circle assemblages which demonstrate how the social and the civic mutually trigger each other by mixing and matching dimensions of public and private. I illustrate this argument by looking at creating online acquaintance as a cause, reposting as mixing and matching public and private, and political talk in closed online assemblages. In the end of the chapter I theorize my findings.

7.2 On Private and Public

Non-acquaintance online assemblages, or strangers assemblages, and acquaintance assemblages made up of family and friends, are roughly parallel the “public” and “private” division of realms of life made by Sennett when describing the public as “a life passed outside the life of family and close friends; in the public region diverse, complex social groups were to be brought into ineluctable contact.”(2002: 17). The parallel refers to the conceptualization of distance of relationship as the division criterion of different “regions” of social life, with different expected role of people and accordingly code of conduct in each region (Sennett, 2002). There are other conceptualizations as criteria of divisions between the public and the private, for example, identity as citizen and as domestic roles (Dahlgren, 2006), interest that is considered public or private (Fraser, 1990), moral principles that are linked to the public or the private (Gal, 2002), and physical space (Parkinson, 2012). The division of the public and private sphere of life underpins political theories like the public sphere (Habermas, 1989), civil society (Seligman, 1992), civic virtue (Dagger, 1997), and democracy, all pinning civic and political engagement in the public realm. There are oppositions to public-private division though. Parkinson argues that what is considered public in one respect may be considered private in other respects (2012: 8). Researchers oppose the placing of civic and political engagement in the public realm only by arguing that both are entwined in everyday life (Dahlgren, 2000; 2003; 2006) and the outsider perspective on the boundaries between the public and the private (Fraser, 1990). Gal proposes that public and private dichotomy is best understood as discursive phenomenon that “once established, can be used to characterize, categorize, organize, and contrast virtually any kind of social fact: spaces, institutions, bodies, groups, activities, interactions, relations” (2002: 81).

Social capital theory, however, challenges the division of the public and the private spheres based on distance of relationship criterion and seeks to look at the civic potentials of all social contacts: from family, friends, neighbours, to distant acquaintances termed as weak ties, and argues that the more frequent social contacts one has, the more social capital the person and the society in general have (Putnam, 2000). Frequent interactions between diverse sets of people are considered civic engagement and bridging social capital which are argued good for information diffusion (Putnam, 2000), including political news and ideas (Choi and Shin, 2017). And political expressions are considered important means of civic participation or political

participation (Zúñica et al, 2012; Choi and Shin, 2017; Wang and Shi, 2019). According to this line of research, social contacts covering wide range of distance of social relationships are good for civic and political participation.

However, social capital theorists hold on to the public-private division by arguing that social capital has a private face and public face (Putnam, 2000). That is, social contacts and relationships are resources that benefit both individuals and the society in general, for example, education (Coleman, 1988) and democracy (Putnam, 2000). Private, in this case, refers to self-interest, and public means the common good. In this sense, social capital theory holds on to the interest criterion of public-private division but dissolves the distance of relationship as public-private division criterion.

Habermas (1989) argued multiplicity of the meaning of public and the transition between public and private in his historical analysis of the bourgeois public sphere. Continuing his argument, the “public” in public sphere theory usually refers to non-acquaintance relationship, space outside home and workplace, issues concerning interest and welfare of many anonymous people usually mediated by journalistic media, and communications on those issues are rational. Researchers on social media continue one or several of the above conceptualizations of the public and the private as its opposite, but argue the collapse of public-private division in terms of contexts (Marwick and boyd, 2010; 2014; Davis and Jurgenson, 2014) and consequent behavioural change of going private in public (Srivastav and Gupta, 2017); the blurring of private and public sphere in terms of identifications, and of individual voices and thoughts in the public sphere of blogging as open space with free flow of information (Youngs, 2009); the mix of public and private in terms of content released on social media platforms (Lange, 2008); and even the reverse of the public and private in terms of distance of relationship (West et al, 2009). To sum up, such research suggests that social media users interact with social media spaces in their own ways by publishing self-regard and beyond self-regard content to their imagined audiences, acquaintances or non-acquaintances or mix of both. By doing so, users define public and private individualistically and create practices with various combinations of dimensions of the public and the private. These conceptualizations of private and public reflected from people’s social media practices suggest that conceptualized dimensions of private and public are largely the same, but people now freely mix and combine those dimensions on social media.

In such environment, Papacharissi (2010) and Highfield (2016) argue not only new forms of citizens' engagement with democracy in digital space but also new conceptualizations on democratic participation per se.

Papacharissi (2010) proposes a private model of doing citizenship and democracy enabled by social media technologies which bring new spaces for citizens to develop social relations, new means of conversation, and new civic habits: personalized agenda of civic concerns, civic activities, or habits in the author's term, in private environment, privatized political conscience, and personal expressions publicly via social media. Highfield (2016) focuses on various personal forms of civic narratives on social media and argues these informal political expressions are new way of political engagement. For them, it is not that using criteria of political participation, mainly dimensions of public, to evaluate what citizens do, where, when, and with whom. Instead, democracy is what citizens do, no matter how, where, when, and with whom. The civic is not what people are expected to do to be citizens, but what citizens as social agents do.

My findings echo these arguments and add more. I concentrate on new civic practices in online assemblages and in assemblage's form. In the following sections, I demonstrate how the social and the civic trigger each other mutually by unpacking my respondents' practices of individualistically exploiting the dimensions of the public and the private based on the collective efforts with other assemblage members.

7.3 Creating Online Acquaintanceship as a Cause

Chambers (2013) and Baym (2015) emphasize the interpersonal level of online acquaintanceship in their researches and frame online acquaintanceship as online friendship. At collective levels, online social interactions are framed as online community or virtual community via which social interactions are conceptualized with civic meaning for forming community. The acquaintanceship per se, as strangers collectively being together purely for the purpose of socializing, is not seen in research. In my fieldwork, however, online acquaintance with strangers was normal for most of my respondents, though not all of them were always active in all those assemblages. Some of these assemblages evolved from interest or hobby assemblages when members became well-acquainted and topics expanded beyond interest and hobby and crawled into life stories. In such assemblages, the mutual triggering of the social and the civic is most obvious. And the most obvious practices were seen in Yu's QQ group. He

hosted a similar group on WeChat too. Yu said in the interview about his intention in setting up such chat groups:

“I want to set up a place to gather people together. People from different part of the country chat about their life, work, complaints, and the like. When we are familiar enough with each other and understand each other’s dispositions, we can organize activities like climbing mountains. Whoever coming across difficulties, say it in the group. The others can send out encouragements, comforts, and supports. If the difficulty is not a big deal, group members can work out a solution. If there is nothing special, we just talk nonsense and have fun. It’s like you have somewhere to go, a place of similar people, people who want peace and joy, getting together. When the group is stronger someday, we will consider doing charities. My current preference is helping poor students.”

Yu intended to build up an online acquaintance assemblage combining socializing and doing charities. The two purposes, one arguably in private sphere and the other as civic engagement in public sphere, are coherent in his intention. He wanted to do charities with his group members.

I observed without participation Yu’s QQ chat group and I found his intention partly realized. The group had 217 members when I joined in and there were constantly newcomers. Yu was seen in the group chats every day. Except him, there were a plenary band of half a dozen members who were also very active. They showed up regularly, initiated talks, resumed talks initiated by others, talked a lot about their life routines and experience. Then there were a handful of less active members who did not show up every day, but quite often, when they said they were not busy. They joined talks, asked for help, offered help, sought and offered support, and shared life moment. Then dozens of members showed up from time to time. Active members played most of the part in keeping the assemblage dynamic. Their collective efforts made Yu think that his end of “creating a peaceful harbour for all” was realized.

Daily talks on life stories were usually very trivial: complaints about traffic jam on way home, blind dates, fear for marriage, high property prices, financial stress, unpleasant moments at work, long work hour and overtime work, office politics, conflicts with colleagues and family, bored at home on holidays, teasing between men and women, asking help for writing love letter, movies and music, and so on. There were often someone voicing trivial difficulties and problems and some other proposing solutions. The

content of the group chats, and sometimes silly talks and gossips, were dominantly social. Members socialized here. They chatted, gossiped, complained, joked, teased, played online games, shared thoughts and joys and sadness, provided emotional support and helpful suggestions, and occasionally discussed and even quarrelled.

Yet, something civic emerged from these social talks. The first is the voluntary participation in and free withdrawal from the assemblage, and the freedom to keep whatever degree of activeness in joining assemblage interactions, and to keep whatever level of self-disclosure. This assemblage is a free association (temporarily for some though) of people. Secondly, the diversity of members in terms of age, regional location, profession and vocation and corresponding social status and identity, and personal experience. In this sense, this assemblage, like many other online assemblages, are re-organizations of social stratifications. Diversity of assemblage interaction topics in terms of individual concerns and voices was observed too. In this respect, the assemblage was like a forum where individuals voiced their personal concerns and whoever interested in followed and conversed. Topics changed quite quickly in a day's interactions but repeated day after day. Thirdly, as Yu's expectations, encouragement, comfort, help, and support were integral part of daily interactions. The embeddedness of such practices was so routine that this assemblage provided more than online help but mutual support. Online social support is argued as online community citizenship behaviour in online support community with civic virtue as an important dimension (Chiu et al, 2015). Yu's chat group achieved online support community effect because of members' civic virtues in social talks. Social talks and civic virtue mutually trigger each other here. Fourthly, the longevity and consistent dynamic of the assemblage out of collective efforts of active members. Every day in the one year and half fieldwork, this assemblage was dynamic. Many time I felt this assemblage was a citizen's social space and engagement space, like a community, because of the deep involvement of active members, the companionship they revealed, and many occasions of mutual help and support. A kind of civic bond (Dahlgren, 2009) was felt here. Civicness is embedded in social talk and is achieved by the key members' activeness and civic virtuous acts of investing time, regular and consistent participation, sharing private thoughts and concerns, and most members' goodwill and kindness to fellow members. Besides, the size of the assemblage, the diversity of members, the diversity of topics, and the anonymity of them added to this assemblage certain degree of publicness, which reinforces the

civiness of this assemblage. This civiness is not based on external good of the content that members of this assemblage collectively generated, but on companionship between anonymous strangers out of long-term social talks.

Lastly, there were talks about news and social affairs from time to time.

Some members had their “field of interest” in news and social issues and sometimes brought forward related events into topics of chats. A university teacher often introduced topics on education; several professionals were interested in reporting Weibo trending topics, for example, on muckraking of the misconduct of the powerful and their family members; some members sometimes talked about economic situations and economic policies; many members talked about their livelihood and injustice they witnessed. The topics were brought into chats as naturally as any other topics and were pushed away by new topics naturally as well. News sharing and talking are argued as political expression and civic engagement (Zúñica et al, 2012) with political importance (Lee and Ma, 2012) and political value (Mascheroni and Murru, 2017). Though in this assemblage, it was usually not news sharing but chatting about news. News, like any other topics, was for igniting personal, and usually emotional, remarks and responses. This echoes findings of research that the factor of emotion predominates in political expression in China (Song et al, 2016). As Dahlgren (2003) proposes, citizens are firstly social agents and civic practices are anchored in everyday life. Informal political talk is spontaneous, non-purpose, and unplanned outcome of social talks (Mascheroni and Murru, 2017). Social talks in this assemblage cultivate civic bond and civic practice between active members, if not all members.

Yu as the host of the assemblage best demonstrated this type of civic practice by his skilful and dedicated moderating and managing of the assemblage. He took hosting an assemblage as a cause. He said in the interview: “I want group members to have a sense of belonging in my group.” According to my observations, Yu succeeded in making this assemblage as his wish: small daily talks and casual chats, peaceful atmosphere, kind of attachment and friendship between some members and between him and some members, collective suggestions and solutions for small problems, a place to relax and to turn to when one sought relaxation, pity, attention, help and assistance, support, fun, or the feeling of being with someone when wanted. Yu was observed to make biggest contributions in these achievements together with active members. And his contributions were from his sense of responsibility to the cause of hosting an assemblage.

Yu said in the interview: "I set up the group, I've got to be responsible." When I asked if he had the sense of responsibility for those assemblages that he joined, he said: "It's not my business." Participation in assemblages that he moderated and in assemblages that he was just a member aroused totally different sense of responsibility from him. His sense of responsibility was local in assemblages that he set up. His responsibilities for the assemblage was observed in several configurations. Firstly, he was observed spending a lot of time in the assemblage every day throughout the fieldwork. He always sent morning greetings to the assemblage and was one of the last to leave it at night. He was often available to join the interactions when he was cued. He said he browsed the group chatting anytime he was able to. Secondly, he played an active moderating role in the group interactions. His moderation included leading talks, supporting talks, stimulating talks, generating topics, cuing members, mediating squabbles and intervening conflicts, and being instantly available when cued. He not only spent time but invested attention to this assemblage. Thirdly, he appeared highly skilful and patient at managing the assemblage. When there were severe arguments between members in showing different opinions or perspectives, he showed up to stop them. He asked both sides to calm down and quickly started up a new topic. He was neutral with different opinions and equal with every member though he said he couldn't tolerate extreme opinions. He did not show bias for those active members or against those who had different opinions from him. He was open and tolerant. He was fair and supportive. He appeared to be very informative and resourceful when he picked up topics and joined interactions on social news initiated by other members. He often went to different social media platforms to recruit members for his chat groups, leaving his WeChat and QQ accounts there with the advertisement "Those who want to be happy and have a moment of peace getting together, please join this group." Fourthly, he had quite clear principles of moderating for his groups and he was observed to practice these principles.

Personality traits like extraversion and openness to experience are argued to play a positive moderating role on the relationship between social media use, discussion network heterogeneity, and civic participation (Kim et al, 2013). My findings show that civic virtues play a key role in using social media affordances to set up and/or join social talk assemblage which become long-term online acquaintanceship assemblage and social space to generate some civic practices. Particularly civic virtues in moderating conscientiously, responsibly, and diligently are key to keep such online

assemblage work effectively and consistently, emphasizing the importance of moderating in keeping online communities healthy and effective (Matzat and Rooks, 2014).

Private topics, social talks, online acquaintances turned from previous strangers, chats on news and current affairs, maintaining a casual chat group as a cause with multiple civic virtues, dimensions of the private and the public were seen synthesized in this assemblage. Or the social and the civic trigger mutually each other here. The extent of “civiness” of such mutual triggering is seen dependent on the social style of the assemblage.

Research on social media and civic engagement is dominantly on the publishing-style social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and so on (Zúñica et al, 2012; Zúñica et al, 2017; Kim et al, 2013; Yu, 2016; Lu and Hampton, 2017; Mascheroni and Murru, 2017), on which users publish content, or send post, and then interact on commenting sections. Yet, very few researchers have investigated social media affordances of social media platforms which facilitated instantaneous interaction-based close online assemblages. My respondents reported that such online assemblages were the most frequently used social media section for them and there are many creative uses of such section. Like in Yu’s QQ chat group, heterogenous and anonymous strangers got together and had “face-to-face”-style direct interactions ranging from intensive to occasional up to members’ choices. As the above descriptions demonstrate, at least from active members and Yu in particular, I saw multiple dimensions of civiness argued by theorists, like civic virtue (Dagger, 1997) shown in Yu and other active members, social capital (Putnam, 2000) in mutual help and support, civic agency and civic competence (Dahlgren, 2006) in news chats and discussions on current affairs, and civic bond (Dahlgren, 2009) or attachment to the host and some other members, emerged from intensive direct social interactions, though online. Some of their online engagement translated to offline social contacts, as seen invitations for members visiting on business trip the cities of other members from group interactions. And Yu was observed calling for online charity donation for a poor student.

Such closed online assemblage differentiated from forum-style, microblogging-style and profile-style social media platform affordances for its relatively clearer form of group and more importantly direct and instantaneous group interactions. Some respondents said they moved heavily their participation in online groups to such kind of groups, particularly on WeChat. As compared with forum-style and microblogging-style social

media affordances, which are argued public social media platforms for open access and visibility, these online assemblages are not technologically open access and visible, though QQ chat group could be searched by QQ users. For WeChat chat groups which cannot be searched, users have their own way to make their groups open, accessible, and visible. Advertising for such groups on different social media platforms, like Yu did, is the most often used way. Some chat groups have their WeChat public accounts, like Ci and Chuan's old building protection WeChat chat group, which can be searched by WeChat users and applied for joining. As suggested in Chapter 5, moving into closed direct and instantaneous interaction assemblages is a trend among social media users in China. Many creative uses of such assemblages were witnessed in my fieldwork. I argue that such assemblages deepen the mutual triggering of the social and the civic. The following section is about other configurations of such mutual triggering: reposted articles as substance to maintain acquaintance relationships.

7.4 Mixing and Combining Public and Private: Reposting

The closed assemblages on QQ and WeChat as Yu's QQ chat group are not the same as close-circle assemblages on QQ and WeChat in which users' relationships are built through real-time interactions (Wang, W. et al 2019). Both are closed in the sense that the content generated by members is accessible only to invited members, not openly accessible by registered users of the same social media platform nor becoming search engine data. But online close-circle assemblages are close and cohesive ego-centric social networks moved from offline. Such assemblages are argued to be connected by the snowball effect via acts of reposting (Wang, et al 2019: 92). The focus of this section is reposting in such assemblages.

Reposting is a "voluntary content sharing behaviour" (Wang, W. et al 2019: 93) and is argued as the ubiquitous and seminal feature of social media contributing to virality in the form of hashtag in some social media forms (Erz et al, 2018) and in various other forms in some other social media platforms. Reposts on Weibo are argued as the main form of online public discussion in China (Liu et al, 2019), of formation of online public opinion (Nip and Fu, 2016b), and the main means for opinion leaders to gain influence to challenge official propaganda in some occasions (ibid). Reposting was one of the major activities that all my respondents did in many online assemblages on different social media platforms. Reposts were also important content that my respondents published in various online

assemblages they participated in, from profiles of various social media platforms accounts to WeChat and QQ chat groups. For the two senior respondents, reposts were the only content observed, both on WeChat Moments and WeChat chat groups. Reposts are major volume of content circulating in the online world and reposting is also the major act of participation. Reposting is argued to increase visibility of reposted content (Wang and Chu, 2019). Besides, several of my respondents said they felt joining in collective efforts by reposting on Weibo because they could see the aggregating of hashtags, though the collective efforts and collective of people were temporary. Reposts on WeChat, however, received not much academic attention. It is worthwhile for a close examination as part of my findings for two major reasons: various dimensions of publicness explicated in reposting in close-circle social networks and new forms of online social movements emerged from reposting practices, which will be detailed in Chapter 9.

7.4.1 Dimensions of Public in WeChat Reposting

In contrast to hashtag-style reposting which is argued to function as grouping messages for visibility so as to facilitate collective action (Wang and Chu, 2019), reposting in WeChat dispersed close-circle personal networks (Tu, 2016) does not create visibility in a public square way. Instead, since reposting is act of sharing by disseminating, it contributes to circulate the content to be accessible to more people, trespassing closeness of dispersed personal networks and increasing accessibility and openness of the content. Meanwhile, reposting ties different personal networks like an invisible thread. By doing so, reposting is an act to set up distributive public (Gershon, 2014), a collective of people disseminating the same content. Therefore, reposting is an act of snowballing content through which reposted content becomes public in such distributive publics. It creates a kind of invisible collective action and invisible collectivity temporarily. However, the technological invisibility is somewhat made up by the counts shown on the reposted article telling how many times the article has been clicked on for reading. Regular and consistent reposting then, has mainly two functions according to my findings: internally, it provides constant substance to sustain connections within close-circle personal networks; externally, it stabilizes connections of dispersed personal networks. In general, reposting contributes to publicizing of reposted content, and mixes the social and the civic. The habits of regular and consistent reposting, therefore, is civic virtuous acts and civic engagements as well.

Yet, not all respondents to whose WeChat profiles I had access were found to repost frequently, regularly and consistently. Many of them reposted irregularly. Yet, they all said their WeChat Moments and some chat groups had many reposted articles, turning each individual close-circle personal network a kind of information bazaar. According to my observations of respondents' reposts in their WeChat updates, the information bazaar formed by their reposts showed large diversity. Diversity of reposts refer to the various topics covered in reposts. There were different scales of topics, from immediate local level to international events. The university respondents all sent reposts about their universities: activities, programmes, achievements, etc, among other topics. Multiple respondents sent reposts about the city where they lived: local policies, local schools, local attractions. Respondents in employment sent reposts about their companies, businesses, vocations and industries. The two senior respondents reposted topics about health, retirement policy and old age life, in addition to historical events and figures, national and international news. Each respondent sent reposts related to their certain roles, identities, life stages, and interest. These contents ranged from exposure of history to current affairs. Besides, these respondents sent more than one "series" of topics. They published reposts related to their multiple roles, identities, and interests, and to their imagined interests of their social contacts. By reposting diverse topics of non-personal content, my respondents created a mini public space in my WeChat Moments. Similarly, their contacts created a mini public space in their WeChat Moments. Diversity of non-personal reposts becomes a kind of public. The social space of WeChat close-circle networks is routinely mixed with such public content and the social and the civic trigger each other here.

Though the richness and diversity of public content are up to the civic virtuous acts of reposting of my respondents' WeChat contacts, they are somehow guaranteed by large number of WeChat contacts since my respondents all said they had more than 100 WeChat contacts, usually several hundred. One contact of mine once said in his WeChat update that he had more than one thousand contacts on WeChat. This is not surprising since people now move many strangers' assemblages to WeChat, as seen in my respondents too. Besides, Xin said that exchange WeChat account was now replacing exchanging mobile phone numbers when people first met in real life. Moreover, WeChat has a "sending name card" function via which one can send the WeChat account of her contact to another contact so that the two can be each other's contact. WeChat has changed the implications of real-life acquaintance. From the most intimate and personal relations like

family to the most distant relations including first-met strangers, strangers that were never met but were friends of friends, strangers from the same WeChat chat group that were friended, and strangers that one came across on other social media platforms and wanted to keep long-term contact, were all kept as WeChat contacts for most of my participants. The diversity of public content in close-circle social network is to a certain degree owing to the diversity of online social contacts.

In addition to the diversity of reposts in terms of content, I found diversity of reposts in terms of sources. Many reposts were content from other social media platforms, the cross-platform sources of reposts will be detailed in Chapter 9. Here, I focus on the major reposts that I observed from respondents: public account articles from WeChat public account platform. Public account platform is argued to function as media outlets and both individuals and organizations can register here to publish posts of texts, pictures, audios, and videos to their subscribers so that subscriber will get shared texts (Tu, 2016). In my fieldwork, I saw reposts of public account articles made by government department announcements, official media news reporting, commercial media news reporting, we-media reporting, various magazine and journal articles, writings of NGOs and commercial companies, school media, writings of influential public intellectuals, famous me-media writers, and unknown individuals. My respondent Ban had her public account, but she quit updating after writing four articles on chicken soup writing. The local old building protection group hosted by respondents Ci and Chuan had a public account too though it stopped updating for more than a year. An active member in the readers group where I observed said she had public account too. She said she wrote political analysis. Public account platform is a publishing and publicizing mechanism particularly useful to ordinary individuals and small groups to turn content from them into the format of media writing with headlines, pictures, by-lines, lead paragraph, and so on. But usually, reposts with large amount of reposting and reading rates are produced by established legacy media, elite we-media, and well-known individuals, similar to findings on Weibo (Wang and Shi, 2018).

Diverse sources of public account articles covered a wide variety of writing genres: news, features stories, investigative writings, columns, commentaries, analysis, essays, proeses, academic papers, announcements, notices, advertorials, literature pieces, eyewitnesses, etc., though they were all made in the format of journalistic writing. For those public account articles

on hot social issues and events and other factual writings, many of them were far from the journalistic criteria of balance, neutrality, factuality, and truth. For a few reposted articles that my respondents sent, I could not tell if they were real stories or fictional stories. And many of those reposted articles were personal opinions, comments, analysis, arguments, knowledge on events, phenomenon, and even emotions. Some were one-sided and even biased. A characteristic with non-journalist's public account articles on hot social issues and events, which were common to see in my respondents' reposts, was what Ji said in the interview: many reversals. These writings did not always stick to journalistic professionalism. Instead, many of them were one-sided, biased, sensational, and not always factual. Some of them were not investigative enough to represent the complexity of issues and events and there were more opinions, even moody expressions than facts. Sometimes, though, some public account writings were grassroots "democratic" expressions of plural standpoints and perspectives on various general interests. Ji said the uncertainty on the truthfulness of these writings discouraged him from sending such reposts as frequently as he used to. I observed this kind of opinions from my WeChat contacts' updates too. Several contacts said they would rather not repost hot topic writings since they were not sure if those writings were true or not. The uneven quality of public account writings raised issues about the validity of such "public" content and deterred some users' willingness to disseminate them. On the one hand, some of these public account articles reflected plural voices, views, standpoints, values and affections, and perspectives of interpretations on meanings of "common sense" knowledge and understanding, in conflicting with mainstream ideologies and particularly official propagandas. In some sense, these phenomena may resonate with the argument that "democracy is messy, inefficient, and conflict-driven" in real life practice (Theiss-Morse and Hibbing, 2005).

A difference between WeChat public account platform and Weibo as well as other social media platforms that can also publish content from individuals and organizations and turn them into public content is that WeChat public account articles are in a uniform format with some journalistic styles and once reposted, there is no markers of the source post. Therefore, there is no way to know about the producers and their credibility. Though there is software to check WeChat public account article producers, none of my respondents knew about such software. Some of my contacts refused to send reposts because of this concern.

The diversity and plurality of reposted content flowing in close-circle social networks added to the degree of mix of pluralistic reposted content my respondents accessed daily. And I observed two ways that my respondents accessed such diverse and plural content. One is subscribing public accounts; the other is passive encountering. The subscribing model reflected participants' active subjectivity to learn, know and access information, knowledge, opinions, analysis, entertainment, or combinations of them. Except the two senior participants, the rest of the participants all said or were observed that they subscribed to public accounts. The reposts got from WeChat contacts form what I called passive encountering model of repostable content. Multiple participants said they reposted in this way. The two senior respondents did not know about subscription of public account and all their reposts were from encountering of their contacts' reposts. Other participants were less dependent on encountering reposts but they said they reposted a lot from reading their contacts' reposts. In the passive encountering model, respondents encountered more plural content than they subscribed. But some respondents said that they did not read reposts that they were not interested in from their contacts and they did not repost those that they did not agree with or identify with, echoing the homophily issue of close-circle groups (Tu, 2016) or of group participation in general (Theiss-Morse and Hibbing, 2005). Each respondent had her own range of, and limited, diversity and plurality.

In some cases, social concerns deterred reposting activities. Xin and Ban are both young professionals and they said after they started their careers, they used WeChat as daily communication tool with colleagues and as means to learn about what their friends and colleagues were doing. "I sent more likes and made less comments after work," Xin said, "Liking more and commenting less. Particularly the posts and reposts of my bosses and colleagues, I habitually liked them." Xin said she had many worries about posting and reposting content on WeChat since her WeChat contacts include her bosses, colleagues, relatives, and shopping agents so that "I'm not that free to post and repost what I want to." The diversity and miscellaneous composition of their WeChat contacts weakened their motivations to post and repost. Both Xin and Ban were found to repost mainly recommendations of local amenities and occasionally public concern content. Social concerns may deter civic activities.

7.4.2 Reposting

Reposting in close-circle social networks became substance of socializing to various extent for my respondents. For the two senior respondents, it was the only content they published in their WeChat Moments. In the interviews, both said they sent reposts that they thought were helpful and useful to their contacts. In addition, Wai said his reposted articles were “good and difficult to get.” He tried to show his resourcefulness and privileged accessibility to content from his privileged social contacts, content that was concealed by official ideological propaganda. Though I found those content reflected official propaganda and ideologies for older generations, popular in China half a century ago. Xuan said she reposted articles that her contacts may learn something from them. She said she controlled the ratios of different content reposts which she thought might interest her contacts in different age groups so as not to annoy any age group. For Wai and Xuan, WeChat Moments were “public” social space to show self and help to others, and they were never observed of sending any personal content throughout the observation period. They said they also sent reposts to their various chat groups from family to former colleagues. Reposts were their “language of socializing” in online space.

For younger respondents, reposting was more about expressing their interest, identity and attitude on public life. When I asked them why they sent a repost, they always said “because it’s interesting” or “because I’m interested in it.” Besides, Ma said he usually reposted in order to “promote exchanges and learnings.” He also said he might get some spiritual resonance that he could not get in daily life by reposting. He also voiced the values he supported by reposting. He said, “It should not be ruled out that I’m making a reputation.” His multiple motivations for sharing reposts corresponded to the diverse topics in his reposted content. Chuan said: “Many of my reposts are branding my image. I just want to tell everyone: I’m identified with this.” Younger respondents were observed to show what they did, thought, and felt in personal life by sending user generated content like pictures and narrations whereas expressing their beliefs, concerns, attitudes and stands by sending reposts. Reposting for them were public or political expression and reposts were their “spokespersons” of public or political expression, in close-circle social network though.

Another finding is that reposting seldom initiated discussions in most close-circle networks except very short complements or likes. This echoes the argument that reposts on China’s Weibo are mainly for information and less

for discussion (Nip and Fu, 2016b) and the arguments that young people read political information, send political content posts, but do not discuss politics on social media like Facebook and Twitter (Ekström, 2016; Mascheroni and Murru, 2017). The finding might be owing to the technological features of WeChat Moments that one can see comments between a poster and her contact only as contact of both. Since I was not contact of my respondents' contacts, I could not see commenting interactions between them and their contacts. And I did not observe my respondents' close-circle network chat groups except Xuan's two WeChat chat groups. But I could see my respondents' replies to their contacts' comments if there were any and I could see "likes" they received for their reposts. Basically, I saw no discussions on respondents' reposts. According to my observation, reposts in WeChat Moments were more one-way than two-way. These observations were confirmed by interviews and multiple respondents said in the interviews that there were not discussions between them and their contacts on reposts and they did not discuss with their contacts who sent reposted either. There were at most a few exchanges of complements or agreements.

Ma said: "I have few exchanges in WeChat Moments. It's purely for sharing. Whoever likes to read my reposted articles, just read them. Exchanges in WeChat Moments are brief and fragmented." He suggested that WeChat Moments were not spaces for detailed and in-depth talks. According to multiple respondents' accounts, they were like news editors: "reviewing" articles from subscribed public accounts, reposts in their WeChat Moments sent by contacts, reposts in WeChat chat groups, News app reporting, or occasionally Weibo, Douban or other social platform writings; gate-keeping them and then publishing the one or ones they chose as reposts. Every respondent "worked" as editors on WeChat, at least reviewing some reposts from their contacts, though several respondents did not repost. And such editor's work is usually one-way. They did not interact much with their "sources" and "audience." On the other hand, multiple respondents said the user generated content on their personal life received relatively more comments and likes in their WeChat Moments. The interactivity of social media is mostly realized around personal content. Reposting as public concern and content is found for informing, instead of talks, dialogues, and discussions.

Therefore, reposting in close-circle social networks on WeChat demarcates a space of coexisting of the social and the civic. But the civic is limited to

sending public content. Discussions on public concern content, as will be seen in the following section, are found in more intimate or specialized social networks. The space of close-circle social networks is then stratified into closer and more intimate network where discussions on public concern content are located and the less close and intimate acquaintance relationship, the so-called weak ties, where public content is circulated. Different senses of public are at play here. The online space of the close-circle social networks is made public in several dimensions: in terms of relatively distant relationship; diverse social contacts; diverse and plural content; informing instead of talking; non-self-regard topics and concerns; and crossing personal social networks. To sum up, reposting adds dimensions to the concept of public and integrates the social, the civic and the public.

7.5 Political Talk in Online Intimate Close-circle Assemblages

Acquaintance relationships are often theorized as private spheres and only a few researchers argue that friends are a part of civil society (Post and Rosenblum, 2002). Some theorists, though, seek civic and political engagement in everyday life covering a wider range of social relationships (Putnam, 2000; Dahlgren, 2003; 2006) and conceptualize talks about public concerns as political talk (Ekström, 2016; Nolas et al, 2017). Research theorizing political talk as social achievements goes even further and look at political talk between friends, peers, and within family (Östman, 2013; Ekström, 2016; Mascheroni and Murru, 2017; Nolas et al, 2017). Such research focuses on the influence and formation of social norms on political talk and argue that young people think social media as a risky and unsafe setting to talk about politics (Ekström, 2016; Mascheroni and Murru, 2017). My findings echo the safety concern on discussions of public concern content but add nuanced empirical data in special conditions: tight online censorship and control. Detailed examination of online censorship and control will be given in Chapter 9. The dimension of safety concern in my respondents was mainly personal safety, which deeply affected their participation in talks and discussions over public concern content. According to interviews with my respondents, the consequences of tighter Internet censorship and subsequent concerns about personal safety include: turning care about current affairs into cultivating personal hobbies and joining online hobby assemblages; withdrawing from reposting and commenting on Weibo

hot social issues and turning to one-on-one exchanges of opinions with Douban friends (including the followers or the followed) and WeChat contacts; posting and reposting content that conforming to speech requirement on Weibo; taking civic engagement both online and offline that is not politically sensitive; and having political talk in online closer and more intimate networks or specialized online assemblages, which is the focus of this section.

Closer and more intimate close-circle networks are considered safe because, as Chuan said, “When censorship on Weibo was tighter, I feel safer to chat these public issues in intimate groups.” She said: “I feel safer because I know them very well. You know they will not inform against you or report you. Safety is based on intimate relationship.” For Chuan, safety is trust based on familiarity and long-term companionship. Yu said something similar. He said he felt little space to express his political views. “I can only talk with several intimate friends,” he said.

For Ji, sense of safety and trust were put in his proximate intimate relationships. He said he was most active in small WeChat chat groups with intimate pals. It is here that he said he talked about current affairs and hot topics. “When I was in high school, I was among a six-member committee of the school student union. We six were on very good terms. We were different in characters, but we were all ambitious.” He said they had a WeChat chat group and he reposted many “in-depth” articles in this chat group and they discussed about them. “We talked about social injustice, visions on future development of our school, and many breaking events,” he said. “We used to discuss a lot but less now, since we are now in different universities and fields of study.” His current active chat group was a smaller WeChat chat group made up of his flat mates at an overseas university. “My flat mates chat group is the most important chat group. Trump’s policy, news about our university, events I read from my WeChat Moments and news media, I repost to this group and we discuss about them. We talk about everyday stuff.” Hot social issues and current events were among everyday topics for Ji and his closest friends.

Dui said she talked about news with parents in family WeChat chat groups. But for Hu, family chat group was not the place to talk about social issues and news, “because they aren’t interested in them,” she said. Instead, she talked about news and social issues in two WeChat chat groups. One was a small colleague network made up of her office mates. She said her boss and one colleague liked discussing social events and current affairs in this chat

group. So she followed suit. The other was hosted by a famous former-investigative journalist that she followed for many years. The journalist was now an online shop owner and hosted this group made up of her customers, many of whom were also her fans. She hosted talks on social issues in the group and Hu sometimes joined. For Hu, talking about news in these assemblages were more like conforming to the atmospheres or the rules of the assemblages.

Bo said he never discussed social issues on any social media platforms. "Because I must be accountable to what I say. Besides, I'm afraid of getting into trouble," he said. The fear of getting into trouble, he said, was because there was no private space on social media. He said he talked about news and social issues privately offline. His sense of safety was unsurveilled private space on the Internet, which he did not think there was any. Though he said he did not talk about social issues online, he encountered posts and reposts about social issues every day on his WeChat Moments sent by one of his contacts, a famous social critic and commentator in China. "I sometimes commented on his posts and reposts or liked them," he said.

In addition to safety concern, other reasons drove several of my respondents who were veteran Internet users retreating from public discussion of public issues: the disappearance of the website devoted to collections of blogs on public topics and issues or blogging website; the flooding of Wumao Party into the news and current affairs forum; the domination of talks on showing off of wealth and extravagant life style in some Douban assemblages; and the prevalence of celebrity news and fans culture on Weibo. These reasons suggested more plural, heterogenous and complicated public spaces in China's public social media platforms.

Östman (2013) argues that political talk is expressive form of political participation and Wang and Shi (2018) propose reposting and commenting on news and public concern information are political expression. Political talk and expressions found in my data show they are informal political talk, which are characterized as spontaneous (Ekström, 2016) and usually non-purposive (Mascheroni and Murru, 2017) in everyday settings. In my findings, political talk is socially spontaneous and sometimes socially purposive – as means of showing trust and intimacy, care and attention, and conformity in addition to civic virtue. The civic and the social mutually trigger each other in the moderator of public concern-oriented political talk. And such talks are at leisure time, random, irregular, and inconsistent.

My findings partly resonate with the argument that close-circle networks on WeChat “provide a comfortable space for discussions and cultivate a series of alternative public spheres” (Tu, 2016: 343) in contrast to Weibo, argued as a large forum of information and communication where national debate can be brewed (ibid: 345). My respondents had public concern informal talks in less open and public ways in various WeChat settings—chat group with families, or close or proximate friends and colleagues, or WeChat Moments. I did not access my respondents’ WeChat chat groups, public account subscriptions, WeChat Moments, and other WeChat spaces because of ethical concerns. What I got was from interviews and observations of posting and reposting. From my collection of data, I do think close-circle networks on WeChat has some public sphere functions, though very primary. Firstly, people express, share, and exchange their public concerns here via sending reposts. Secondly, people show support, agreement, interest, or courtesy by reposting, commenting, and liking. Thirdly, though there is no deliberation and in-depth discussion, people do use reposts as “representative” or “agent” to engage a kind of conversation.

Close-circle networks on WeChat are sometimes ego-centred communicative spaces for communicative acts on public concern topics and content, functioning as political forum at much weaker sense though. In this respect, they are a kind of ego-centred public space, if not public sphere. A question arises then: if and how much are these ego-centred public spaces networked, if not connected? Without being networked or connected, these ego-centred public spaces are isolated enclaves and their “publicness” and influence are constrained and very limited. Reposting plays a role here to connect each personal social network and the argued ego-centred public spaces. But the diversity and plurality of everyday reposted content, though add to the dimensions of publicness, weaken the “connecting” role. My finding is that the close-circle social networks were connected when Internet event was seen on social media, which will be detailed in Chapter 9.

7.6 Theorizing

Scholars use pre-social media dimensions of public and private, which are like the two sides of one coin, to look at civic practices on social media (e.g. Papacharissi, 2010). These dimensions include distance of social relationship, codes of conduct (including discursive and narrative means), space, identity and roles, interest and concern, openness and accessibility, visibility, scale of collectives, diversity and plurality, etc. In addition, there is

one dimension which creates the “largest” dimension above all dimensions: mass media. Habermas (1989) highlighted the publicity function of mass media and Hess (2016) proposes the central role of news media in civic life. In literature using dimensions of public and private and exploring civic engagement and political participation/expression, news is not only a key dimension of public which is conducive to civic and political involvements but also a “mechanism” to become public. That is, when dimensions of private is mixed with news, it is considered public. News media in the above literature unanimously refer to traditional mass media. Even when arguing using social media increases chances of incidentally exposed to news which is argued to be positively related to civic and political engagement, news is pre-assumed as works of organizational and professional media (Zúñica et al, 2012; Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018).

What my findings add to the literature is that new mechanism of becoming public emerges on social media which adds layers to the dimensions of the concept “public”. Firstly, collective reposting, commenting and discussing under the same post, are means to make the relevant content public and form people into public. Secondly, non-professional-media organizations and individuals publicizing content in online assemblages either made up of followers or close-circle social networks or strangers make the content public. Though the bigger the assemblages and the more reposting, the more public the content becomes. Thirdly, aggregating of people and the content they generate form public, particularly when the aggregates are openly accessible and become search engine “feed.”

Public forming in social media assemblages is the co-product of social media technological affordances and social media users. News, visibilities of social issues, public events, and public concerns are manufactured by social media users themselves. In social media age, mass media are not the sole or major institution and power to manufacture news, publicity, publicness, or visibility of social events and issues. Commercial and non-profit organizations, groups, and individuals make vigorous efforts to join or share such manufacturing process, facilitated by social media technological affordances like posting, public account platforms, and reposting. When the “power” of making news, publicity, publicness, and the public are shared, the dimensions of “public” are not only layered, but also broadened. Concomitantly, what can be conceptualized as civic talks, political expressions, and civic engagement are broadened. Public, publicness, and

the public are participatorily constructed on social media by collective efforts. And participation in such construction process is civic virtuous acts.

Furthermore, the dimensions of the public are not only broadened, the intertwining of dimensions are more complicated, diverse and plural in mix and combination of dimensions of public and private. Therefore, everyday participation in collective efforts to construct public, publicness, and the public is civic engagement no matter where, with whom, from what motivations, for what purposes, and out of what interest when such participation is conducted. Because in one way or another, the participation “plugs in” one or more dimensions of public and contributes to civic outcomes, mostly implicitly. When everyday social interactions are mediated, grouped, algorithmized, surveilled, and censored in China, the social is the civic. And this is the iceberg of civic and political participation below the water. It is seen when water is boiling, as unpacked in Chapter 9. When social interactions are mediated and grouped, as seen above, public concern content becomes a kind of filler of social interactions in collectives, or means to set up identity, seek identification, show rich resources of information or status, etc, up to idiosyncrasies of private individuals. Algorithmizing collects all mediated interactions as data, turns them into part of big data for various uses by individuals, businesses, organizations, and governments. Censorship, as will be seen in Chapter 9, is not a secret but open and Chinese social media users are well aware of it. Challenging, ridiculing and playing tricks with censorship become a kind of everyday political expression in China. Conforming to censorship or evading it is out of fear of getting into trouble instead of support it or submission to it. The awareness of censorship is awareness of lack of freedom of speech.

I argue that intertwining of public and private dimensions co-produced by social media users’ practices, social media technological affordances, and context in China enriches conceptualizations of civic practices. The conceptualization of the civic is not up to any single dimension but the mix and combination of dimensions. In this way, some dichotomic concepts like self-regard and other-regard, self-interest and public interest, and personal concern and common concern merger in intertwining with other dimensions. This increases the “scale” of the concept public and increases the explanatory power of the concept in social media context, as seen in the following example.

In a reposted article that Ci sent on his WeChat Moments, a columnist gaining online fame by writing and publishing in her Douban profile wrote

about the halt of Douban broadcasting function, suspiciously as a means of censorship. The author argued that though Douban was a public social media platform, the relationship between those long-term followed and followers were friends, therefore private, and private space should not be censored. While another repost that Ci sent months later, an academic paper arguing the shrink of public discussions in China's social media platforms, said that Douban as a public social media platform was under very strict censorship, resulting in the disappearing of public discussions. In fact, it was argued, public discussions as seen in the early Internet days were disappearing on all social media platforms in China. The two voices were both about opposition against censorship but arguing with different dimensions of public and private.

Chapter 8

Online Activism and Civic Virtues

8.1 Introduction

If the social and the civic are two ends of a spectrum, the chapters so far examine the broadening of the range of the blurry transition in between. This chapter furthers narrowing down the exploration of the civic in social media assemblages to the end of the civic and the civic here is showing concerns on social problems. Concerns on social problems highlight the transcendence of self-regard and private interest and the inclination to common good. Different from previous chapters which mainly look at the civic reflected from collective efforts in online assemblages, this chapter looks at individuals' intentional, long-term, and consistent civic engagement emerged in online assemblages and civic virtues demonstrated in such civic engagement. I term this kind of civic engagement as amateur online activism. I unpack civic virtues detected from my respondents via their amateur online activism practices. Online activism is used for the examination of the relationship between online assemblage participation and civic virtue because researching on online activism has provided flexible enough conceptualizations to "match" my data: systematic, frequent, and repeated efforts made by respondents in forms of online assemblages cross social media platforms. I find that amateur online activism reveals individuality of portfolios of civic virtues and of portfolios of civic engagement and I argue that these findings revalue the civic in mundane. Next, I first review literature on types of online activism and then look at how interest is fostered in and related to online assemblage participation. After that I move on to demonstrate both descriptively and analytically different kinds of some respondents' online activism activities, including uncontentious activities, contentious activities, and political talk in a close group. In the end I theorize idiosyncratic multiple forms of online activism that social media and civic virtue co-facilitate.

8.2 Types of Online Activism

The importance of online individual activists is highlighted by specific political conditions in China, as pointed out by Tkacheva et al: "Since Chinese Communist Party bans all organized political opposition, online mobilization is undertaken not by professional politicians or interest groups, but by individual activists interlinked by virtual ties" (2013: 103). I term some of my respondents as amateur activists firstly because of the intensity and consistency of their online activities, and secondly to distinguish them from professional activists like those staff in NGOs, charity organizations, social workers, etc.

Scholarship on online activism has two lines forked at the concept of "contention," though the concept is flexible enough to cover wide range of activities. In the research on contentious politics in digital media environment, contentious activities refer to protest, rallies, and other massive embodied actions (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). When researching online activism, contentious activities range, according to degree of contention, from more contentious ones like hacktivism to less contentious ones like social and political discussions and debates (Yang, 2009). In this context, Zhang argues that she finds new online activism, which is uncontentious in contrast to contentious online activism, termed as conventional online activism (2014: 277). This new online activism, Zhang argues, "shows citizens and activists use the Internet mainly for forming communities, sharing information, instilling democratic values and solving immediate social problems" instead of using the Internet for "offensive online or offline actions" like cyberwar and protests (2014: 277). This new online activism refers to not using contention as ends and means in their online collective actions, or not being offensive. What I find most useful from Zhang's argument is "solving immediate social problems" and I use it for my conceptualization of online activism. So, active uses of online assemblages for tapping into personal hobbies and interests, common to see in my respondents, are not online activism that I explore here.

I found both contentious and uncontentious online activism from my respondents. In fact, multiple respondents had both contentious and

uncontentious activism, in different online assemblages though. What my findings add to the literature is that contentious and uncontentious activism are not “social media platform” specific, that is, I found contentious and uncontentious activism on WeChat and QQ, in addition to the often-mentioned public social media platforms like forums (Yang, 2009; Zhang, 2014) and Weibo (Wang and Shi, 2018). My findings show that some amateur online activists moved some activism from public social media platforms to personal social network sites like WeChat and QQ to avoid tight censorship on public social media platforms, though most of them had a “portfolio” of activism across different social media platforms. My practice-centred ethnographic research on online assemblage participation provides a useful perspective to avoid platform-specific angle of research which may miss the dynamics of online activists in multi social media platforms environment. With this perspective, I found each activist respondent had her or his own way of doing online activism in terms of using different combinations of social media platforms and online assemblages, combinations of contentious and uncontentious means and content, means of collaboration with collective efforts, and degree of interactivity in activism. In the condition of multiple online assemblage participation, I argue that online activism is individualistic to certain extent. Individualities of online activism adds difficulties to unpack and structure my findings.

Online activism is defined by Levine and Nierras as the use of Internet to support an agenda or cause and activist as “someone who tries to advance a substantive political or social goal or outcome” (2007: 1). Both definitions emphasize the end-awareness of actors. In my research, not all respondents spoke out strong awareness to achieve certain ends and support certain cause, though some of these could be perceived via observations. My definition of online activism in this chapter is consistent, regular, and long-term uses of social media with civic outcome to influence/change social issues. This definition is based on what emerges from my data, which will be unpacked in the following sections.

My respondents were all spare-time online activists. They are in contrast with those working for/in registered formal organizations including Non-governmental organizations (NGO). Registered is a key word. In China,

registry means, as respondent Chuan said, “You must have source of fund. You must have physical space. These are not big problems for us. You must have a brand. But everything you do must get approval from the government. That’s troublesome. And you must have full-time staff.” To avoid “troubles” of formal registry, Chuan and a few others who were mostly students then set up a digitally connected group to carry out local old building protection activities for almost a decade, which will be detailed later in this chapter.

I combine three factors emerged from my fieldwork: time, consistency, and social problem concern to define activists in this chapter. Social problem concern here refers to the “common good” dimension of public. The reasons to conceptualize this way is that they emerge from my data and categorize my respondents’ practices. This conceptualization is in contrast with contentious activities that some researchers concentrate when arguing about online activism (Yang, 2009; Tang, 2015) or political motivation, organization, and dialogue when political activism is conceptualized (Miller, 2017). As seen in the following unpacking, my conceptualization does not exclude contention, motivation, organization and dialogue. In addition to previous chapters’ analysis of the civic as outcome of collective social acts knitted by civic virtuous acts and with external good, this chapter looks at the intent and contents of social media activists, echoing the call from Miller (2017) who distinguishes convivial communion style of some social media activism referring to active political talk in the social media for convivial purposes from traditional sense political activism. He thinks this distinction is important because he argues that the former is more likely to reproduce the status quo and the latter emphasizes conflict and transformation (ibid). His research is useful in the sense that the focus of online activism shifts from technological affordances of social media, either used by organizational activism as tools or used by individuals as organizational tools (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), to what ordinary people do with and on social media in terms of political information sharing and interactions. My findings have resonance with Miller’s practice approach on intent and content as perspectives to examine social media activists. Moreover, my findings raise

issues of the relationship between intent and civic virtue as well as content and civic virtue.

My focus is not who are online activists among my respondents and what they do but why they do what they do and what possible civic virtue could be detected from what they do and say. So my understanding of online activists goes back to their personal history of using social media and examines their uses of multiple social media platforms.

8.3 Interest and Online Activism

The most heard answer I got from my respondents when asked why they sought political information and opinions online, reposted news reporting or public account articles on public issues, providing online help, joining an online political talk group, or hosting a “public forum” style chat group, is “I’m interested in it” or “it’s interesting.” The answer was given for sporadic acts, and for long-term consistent practices as well, as I observed.

Political interest is defined by some as an affective behavioural motive (Reichert, 2018). This definition seems to apply to any kind of interest since it is not particularly connected to behaviour in any field. I similarly use the term civic interest as an affective behavioural motive to see the relationship between my respondents’ online assemblage participation and civic virtues. It is different from personal motivated utilitarian uses of online collective efforts as suggested in previous chapters, nor is convivial motivation, nor political motivation as suggested by Miller (2017). Civic interest is the major reason I found from my respondents’ online activism.

For interest as a motive for participation, Bimber et al (2015) argue that the role of political interest varies across different political acts and over time when it moderates the relationship between digital media use and political participation. Chuan’s accounts partly echo this when she said in the interview about the digitally-connected old building protection group of which she was one of the core members: “You can do it consistently. You can also do it improvisingly.” She suggested that interest-motivated online civic engagement did not necessarily produce regular and consistent participation

or acts. What engages regular and consistent civic participation then is a question.

Another question is where and how civic interest is cultivated. My findings reveal that online assemblage participation on public social media platforms are educational sites of civic interest cultivation. Multiple respondents who were online activists said they started joining online assemblages on Weibo, Douban Group, and Tianya Forum since high school and they got interested in the field that they later became activists. The cultivation function of public social media platforms is reflected from Ci's account of how his interest in local old building protection was formed and activated.

Ci said his registry on Douban in 2011 when he was in high school was the first time his world was broadened beyond his hometown to the whole country and even the world. Before that, he only had acquaintance assemblages on QQ. On Douban, he chose several fields of interests and joined respective Douban groups. Since then he received recommendations of Douban account holders who were in the same field of interest as he. He then got to know some people from different parts of the country and became friends with them in real life. He said his habit of browsing Douban accounts gradually fostered his interest in protection of old buildings.

Douban accounts are profiles of registered Douban users. Users can upload pictures, articles or diaries of their own writings, repost other Douban's writing or diary, rate and review books, movies, soup operas etc. Their timelines cover every trace on Douban including liking and commenting, which are recorded in their profiles.

Ci said after his interest in old building protection formed, he started sharing on Douban his concern with local old building in his hometown. He then joined a Douban group composed of locals in his hometown. In this group he came across several home fellows who were all students, high school and college, in different parts of the country, with the same interest in protecting local old buildings. They set up a Douban group in 2012 themed protecting local old buildings and from then on his "career" as an amateur online activist began.

In Ci's account, Douban played vital roles in fostering his interest and turning his interest into action: broaden horizon; foster habit of account browsing, that is, information seeking, and sharing; broker or network same-minded and build stable interaction and relations; meet home fellows and find the same-minded; and become the site of their online group and online activities.

Ci's account provided valuable longitudinal data which is very rarely seen in literature on social media's facilitating role of civic interest cultivation and fostering. The facilitating role of social media is configured as enabling by breaking restrictions. In Ci's case, as a high school student, his limited access to outside world, like-minded pals, information and knowledge, networking and organizing devices, associating resources like funds and space, means of conducting activism, etc., were compensated by social media affordances. Besides, these social media affordances were not just technological features, but people's collective efforts blended in technological features, as technologies as practice theory argues (Suchman, 1999). In Ci's account, it is people and their content generation on social media that fostered his civic interest. In the interest-forming stage in his activism life, he showed strong emphasis in interacting with people. Douban, particularly Douban Group, was the place for him to come across same-minded people.

Ci's civic interest was mainly fostered on one social media platform, though he migrated from assemblage to assemblage. Whereas Hu and Yu's civic interests were cultivated across multiple social media platforms. In migrating from one social media platform to another, Hu and Yu put more emphasis on seeking satisfaction from reading content that fellow social media users created instead of building interactions with content generators, as Ci did. Whether this is due to the technological features of different social media platforms, or "community culture" that each platform strived to create, or personal characters is beyond the discussion here. But it could be cautiously said that different ways of interest cultivation contributed to different ways of activism between my respondents.

Hu initially turned to online forums for her interest in music and literature. “I liked to learn more, I liked to share, I liked to talk with strangers, those who had the same hobby as me and we talked about whatever we were both interested in. I think I was open minded,” she said. Hu contributed her initial interest in online interactions to her dispositions, echoing the disposition-anchored definition of civic virtue. But she said she lost interest in the online groups that could not provide more in-depth knowledge to satisfy her and she searched new assemblages to join. It is until 2008, eight years after her first online group participation as a high school student, and her migrations of several platforms, that she came to a website which gathered most popular articles from several blogs then in China. “There were many articles written by liberal intellectuals. I liked reading those articles and then commented on those I was interested in. This website was very influential, and I think it made influence on the political orientation in China then. It made me become more interested in public life. And I started being interested in discussing about the country, the society.” Hu’s dispositions of outgoing, curiosity, and open-mindedness helped her form the habit of online assemblage participation and years of such habit cultivated her civic interest in social issues side by side with her personal hobby and interest.

Hu’s interest in public life moved to Weibo in June, 2010, after the website was blocked. But her habit of joining discussion continued since Weibo as a microblogging site has similar technological affordances as the website she previously used. Her interest narrowed in recent years specifically in social injustice, particularly injustice on women.

As compared with Ci, Hu’s civic interest fostering shows similarities. Information seeking, argued as a civic virtue (Warren, 2001), was the prelude of their civic journey. Internet and social media broaden horizon not only by breaking time-space limitations, but also by breaking social stratifications. The reorganization of people by online grouping argued in Chapter 5, according to interest in this case, provided opportunities of fostering, realizing, and sustaining civic interest in collective environment. Both fostered their civic interests gradually, though it took much longer for Hu, by exposing to, if not immersed in, online assemblage environment.

The above analysis is based on respondents' accounts of their "personal history" of social media practices. I observed one too. Fa, a law student, used one online name on Weibo, Douban, Zhihu and WeChat so that I could access all her traces on them. I found her very active since high school, in the way of leaving traces or content like writing diaries, commenting, liking, archiving, posting, reposting, following, etc. on multiple topics but in the past three years mainly on Western pop music, and law and legal condition in China. Her major site of activism was on Weibo where she followed many lawyers and frequently reposted on law and legal issues. Civic virtues like information seeking, sharing, and reciprocal acts mentioned in earlier chapters contributed to their civic interest fostering and cultivating. Social problem concern, one of the criteria I use to measure activism, emerged as facilitator in fostering their civic interests. And social problem concern covers a wide range of concerns: hometown, the society, the country, social injustice, feminism, others' grievance, national and international news, legal issues and conditions in the country, politics, old age well-being, architecture, American soup operas, radio drama, etc., as mentioned by some of my respondents.

The last three items in the above list seem problematic as social problem concern. They appear to be hobby. Hobby is usually seen as leisure activities for self-satisfaction. Online hobby assemblages, for example, web-based backpacker groups as seen in some research, conduct online and offline activism, take collective actions, and develop associational life (Zhang, 2014). What I add to this literature is that hobbies could be conducive to becoming social problems in China. For example, Ci's interest in architecture turned him to protecting local old buildings from being demolished by government or commercial land development. American soup operas are not allowed to broadcast in China's national and provincial TV networks and are only accessible in the online via video websites and individual online users' sharing. Watching and discussing online American soup operas mean a kind of underground activity although there are many American soup opera groups in the online, in several of which my respondent Gong participated. Radio drama groups, like the one that my respondent Bo once participated in, are mostly voluntarily made up by online

novel fans, some of whom turn forbidden same-sex and ghost novels into online radio drama. Many hobby assemblages of such kind generate civic space and social concern.

What I found is that all activist respondents had a “history” of vigorous uses of open group social media platforms for information seeking, but this does not suggest that this “history” necessarily resulted in their online activism. What differentiates activist respondents from active respondents in terms of online assemblage participation is the long and consistent civic interest in influencing or changing social issues and more importantly taking long and consistent actions to practice civic interest, though such interest may change from one field to another, as I see from my respondents. Taking actions, or practicing civic interest, is an important civic virtue for online activists.

8.4 Uncontentious Online Activism and Civic Virtue

Uncontentious online activism has been seen in online charity programmes (Zheng and Yu, 2016), NGO’s uses of social media (Zhou and Pan, 2016), and online interest groups (Zhang, 2014). Such research focuses on the mobilizing, fund-raising, recruiting, and information disseminating roles that social media plays in online activism (Zheng and Yu, 2016; Zhou and Pan, 2016) and on associational life such as activism enables which is significant for civil society (Zhang, 2014). My findings provide more types of online uncontentious activism and civic virtues detected from each.

Ci and Chuan described their old building protection group in separate interviews. According to their accounts, their group took full advantage of social media development in China to expand their influence and brand and they set up group accounts on several social media platforms including Douban, Weibo, WeChat, and Facebook, though there were very few updates and not updated for years. The focus moved from Douban to Weibo then to WeChat consecutively. The uses of three major social media platforms reflected three stages of development. On Douban and Weibo, group members posted articles about local old building; recruited group members and followers; moderated talks on local old building and old building protection; discussed government’s demolishing of old buildings for

urbanization; advertised offline activities; and so on. The group moved their major site to Weibo because discussions there were more synchronous and interactive, and also because Weibo was more influential and popular in China then. Some core members, a dozen of them, used Weibo following function as influence-making and recruiting device. Throughout the years, the core members had QQ chat group and later WeChat chat group as “management team” for planning, coordinating, collaborating, operating, and tie-maintaining. The group also set up WeChat public account to send articles and notifications for activities, though the updates were irregular and halted after the group became a WeChat chat group.

In offline activities, they carried out community research, wrote proposals and reports on old building conditions and protections, sent their proposals and reports to local government, participating in government-sponsored exhibitions and held exhibitions of their own. They also had volunteering guided city tours. Their activities have won attention from local TV and their activities were reported. After that, their group has gained some influence and were invited by some local government departments for consultation and participation in local projects.

Chuan said about the differences between their online actions and offline ones. “They targeted different audience. The online ones targeted the public, for the purpose of disseminating. The offline ones targeted government attention.” What she meant is that online activities were for arresting public attention with what they did offline so as to engage members, followers, and volunteers whereas the offline ones were for lobbying influence.

When my fieldwork started in May 2018, their group was planning to give up offline activities and turning solely online because of different ideas of several core members and of the end of their student life. A few months later, their group became a WeChat chat group on local old building protection. Their online activities included recruiting for this group, moderating group chats, and providing consultation when required.

Ci and Chuan’s accounts of the group in its Douban and Weibo stages echoed research on organizations’ use of social media (Nah and Saxton, 2012; Shi, 2013), though the group was not a formal organization. Therefore,

what distinguishes this group from those depicted in literature is that there was always a core management team – though team members were not always stable, and the group was not as decentralized as those in literature (Zhang, 2014). Moreover, they showed strategic and tactical integration of online and offline activities. Their online activism revealed that social media is not only tools of civic engagements; it is also site of civic engagements (Yang, 2003a; 2003b). In addition, it is site of civic education and training for many college students members, and for the core team members as well. Ci was a contentious online activist on WeChat, and Chuan took part in civic activities in the city where she lived. Their civic engagements were not limited to this group. Some literature suggest features of online community as no need of formal means for enforcing agreement and conformity, and “an open-ended social body that primarily relies on voluntary participation, collaboration, mobility and flexibility” (Zhang, 2014: 277). The two respondents’ accounts added much more nuanced features of online civic assemblages than that, and added nuanced understanding in social media’s enabling role in amateur activism: avoiding “troubles” of formal registry and subsequent government’s supervision on group activities; time and cost-saving on administrative work; easy come easy go membership; relatively easy formation and maintenance of collective efforts in the form of online assemblage; flexible requirements on respondents’ commitment and time and degree of devotion; and flexibility in group dynamic and future development. As Chuan said, “We didn’t officially announce the dissolving of the group. We just don’t expect it to be as dynamic as in the past. When the situation is right, that is, when there is an event and we core members happen to be available, we will still organize activities like in the past.”

Literature on the enabling role of social media on online activism emphasizes five modes: information seeking and publishing; social media as communication tool to build dialogue, coordinate actions and lobby decision makers (Warren, 2014). What new in my findings is the resilience and adaptability that amateur activists’ group showed in taking advantage of technological affordances as means of doing activism. The latest form of this group, a WeChat chat group, is the most time and attention-saving means for its core members to sustain the existence of the group. Chuan said about

the group: “Some members express themselves here. Some members post content that they think other members will be interested in. Some members ask questions about local life. Whatever questions are raised, there will always be someone to answer. It’s like a public forum. It’s like a space to show there are such a group of people; they have a space to talk.”

With the change of purpose and function of the group as a chat group, the management style changed too. Chuan said she did not know most members of the chat group now. And she did not have intention to know them. The core members had minimal moderation of the group. They let the talks, discussions, and debates develop freely and topics go broadly. Even when there were quarrels, they did not show up to intervene. But they were aware of such “abnormal dynamic,” in Chuan’s words. The core members, having another WeChat chat group, would talk about it at abnormal moments.

The resilience that this amateur activists group revealed has not been captured by literature. I found the resilience mainly based on two elements: one is the resilience of core members; and the other is the flexibility of core members. Both are pillared on the civic virtues of core members: consistency, commitment, dedication, sense of a collectivity, love of hometown, and pride in local culture. These civic virtues engage them for years to do a public cause, overcoming many difficulties. Chuan described the critical moment that the core members decided to halt offline activities and turn the group into a solely online one.

“In fact, a dozen of us had a meeting that day. We planned to discuss some rules, regulations, means to make the group more institutionalized. But one said, it’s so exhausting. How about we dissolve it? In fact, all of us feel psychologically exhausted. But this is a collectivity. You can’t be the first one to say it.” The planned discussion to formalize group civic engagement brought to its end. Obligations out of institutionalization put stress on these amateur activists. In contrast, online activism is less stressful.

It was exhausting, Chuan said, because it was long-term commitment to a demanding cause, as long as seven or eight years. Demanding, Chuan said, “because you always have to make various activities, you have to maintain

influence. This influence does no good to your personal career. When you are not a student, you have to earn bread.” Changing life stage changed form of civic engagement for these amateur activists and online activism is less demanding for them.

Chuan’s words answered the question I raised in the last section: what sustains interest? The answer is, firstly, civic virtues listed above; secondly, the collective and collaborative teamwork; thirdly, good personal ties between team members. The last is a notable feature of this group. Chuan said the chat group of the core members was a private and intimate group for her. They not only talked about issues related to the group, but also talked about public events and social issues. This was the place that she felt safe to talk about such issues without being worried to be reported. Good personal relations between members in addition to civic relations, or the relationship between them as amateur activists, are binding force for online civic group.

The most notable feature of this online civic group is the indispensability of a dozen of civic virtuous core members with intimate private relations. The changes of their life stages affected the way the group existed and functioned. But the changes also bear hopes for the possible future rejuvenating of the group.

The findings that social relations entangle with civic relations are most notable in two senior respondents, who demonstrated another kind of uncontentious online activism: sending nothing else but reposted articles in all their WeChat chat groups. WeChat was the only social media they used. They conducted various social relations here: with family, relative, former colleagues, former classmates, friends, neighbours, and other real-life contacts, in one-on-one communications but more often in chat groups. Except using WeChat chat groups as communication tool for various notices and casual chats similar to the use of a telephone, they used public content articles and news reporting as means to engage social ties. Other respondents also used WeChat in this way but not as consistently and “purely” as them. “Purely” means that in their frequently, most of the time

daily, updating of WeChat profiles, they did not post any private content, throughout my observation period.

Their reposts include national and international news, wellbeing, medicines, food, jokes, historic documents, chicken soup articles, sightseeing and travel articles, and so on. "Reposts enrich my cultural life and the content of contacts between my friends and me as well," Xuan said. She got the reposts all from her WeChat chat groups, composed in various ways by her 200 contacts. She said she got most hot social topics and news from WeChat. "Some of them are not reported on TV. I watch CCTV¹⁶ prime-time news every day. I know very well that some WeChat hot news are not reported on TV." Some reposts, as said in Chapter 7, function in some way as citizen media. And Xuan used these reposts as alternative sources of news and social issues.

Xuan hosted several WeChat chat groups and I sat in two of them. She said she set up those groups for introducing her contacts to know each other and to learn from each other. Her way of hosting was to send reposts. She said she read many reposts a day from her WeChat groups and from her contacts' reposts on Moments. She then selected and reposted into different chat groups based on what she thought the group members might think interesting or useful. She orchestrated the flow of news and non-personal information in her social networks as means to maintain social networks.

Wai was more heavily dependent on WeChat and he was more active in online assemblages too. He updated almost every day. He said he spent three to four hours a day reading WeChat posts from his 80 contacts in various assemblages. "Whenever I hear the sound of WeChat notification, I want to have a look. I want to know who sends what," he said. As compared with TV, he said, "WeChat is much better than TV. TV programmes are not that interesting. They are rather shallow. Here they only report good news on TV. No negative news. WeChat is different. There is everything here: good and bad, positive and negative, home and abroad, current and historic, educational and informative. There are wide coverages of information and

¹⁶ China's Central Television, the only national TV network in the country.

knowledge. I'm very interested in WeChat," he said. Reposts on WeChat are alternative media helping him sensitizing propaganda on broadcasting media.

For the two old-age respondents, WeChat was their main alternative sources and resources of information, knowledge, entertainment, and important way of socializing too. Actively receiving, reading, and reposting news and other articles were part of their old life: keeping touch with all contacts, socializing with family and friends, getting informed about news and current events, learning knowledge, making contributions and being useful to others, and as Wai said in the interview, "living meaningfully." Wai said sending reposts of articles and information was more useful than other socializing like talking on the phone and meeting with his old pals. Talking on the phone and meeting in person are mainly phatic communication while online socializing involves sharing public content. This is an addition to what Millar argues that there is phatic culture on social media (Miller, 2017). For social media users like Xuan and Wai, phatic communication is in real-life socializing while public content communication occurs in online assemblages.

Xuan and Wai demonstrated civic virtues like other-regard, information and knowledge learning, sharing etc. in their uses of social media assemblages. They wanted to benefit receivers of their reposts for providing useful or interesting content and this is very different from some young peoples' claims that "I send things that I think interesting." Their active sharing of public content in social media close-circle networks is kind of activism because of their consistent, regular, and perseverant reposting of public content. They used various public content to maintain contact and communication with their close and distant acquaintances. By doing this, they thought they were helpful, useful, and having meaningful life. They created a kind of public life by circulating public content in social networks online.

8.5 Contentious Online Activism

"I was asked by many if my routinely anti-communist party is out of hopes that the country will become what I will be satisfied with. I'm sorry that I don't

have any particular imaginations about the ideal society. Because countries and societies are so different from each other. There are no specific enough realities available for us to imagine. But I'm very sure that our life should be getting good. Getting good doesn't come from the self-evolution of the state itself. It's like an idealess Party A can't ask Party B to make a brilliant design for him. Getting good is from every one of us individuals. We are upright. We are brave. We are free. We change what we can change. I never failed the request of anyone who has suffered injustice. I also worked hard to fight for the people around me for the rights they deserve. A Hitler couldn't kill the Jews. What he had was just one accomplice after another."

This is a WeChat Moment post from Ci. He published many comments and reposts as radical as this one in my observation period. He made this post with a reposted article critical of China's coronavirus situation written by a well-known public intellectual, titled *Unhappy is the Land that Needs Heroes*. This article was banned soon, like many other critical articles circulated on WeChat. Before having been banned, this article had been reposted by many. I saw it a dozen of times on my WeChat Moments.

Ci's "routinely anti-community party" echoes the form of online activism which focus on "confronting and resisting the authorities whose political interest is counter to that of the activists" (quoted from Zhang, 2014), and is not the same as Yang's conceptualization of China's contentious online activism which focus on activities like "social and political discussions and debates that take place online daily." (Yang, 2009: 3). The main ways of his confronting the authorities were reposting articles with subversive content and sometimes put his comments along with reposts. In the one and half year observation of Ci's WeChat updates, he routinely reposted critical articles and information, many of them banned, from maintenance of rights of workers to articles in Metoo campaign. His critical articles and information were usually related to current affairs and news, but also about injustice and unfairness ordinary people suffer in their life, events that are concealed in the mainstream media like protests and injustice treatment of the vulnerable, social affairs, accounts and stories of ordinary people and witnesses in news event, and his field of interest, old building protections. His reposts included comments, analysis, investigations, exposures, criticisms and opinions,

sometimes with his comments or excerpts from the reposted articles. His comments showed his angers, satires, even hatred to injustice, suppression of freedom, violation of rights, and misconducts of those in power; and showed his sympathy and support to the vulnerable and the grieved. What made him different from the contentious online activism conceptualized by Yang (2009) was he did not intend to discuss or debate, though he did in the past.

Ci said in the interview that he had been active on Weibo for its non-acquaintance circles and huge amount of timely information. He said his major fields of concern on Weibo were news media and human rights lawyers. He followed them and read their posts. He said he was not interested in social networking there. He did not want to know the bloggers or followers, he just wanted to access the content: news, information, or opinions. "China's news environment was not this bad then. Many breaking news and event could quickly brew on Weibo. I really liked Weibo then as a high school student. I often expressed my support at that time. Now looking back, I'm sure most of my posts and reposts at that time have been deleted." He participated in online civic and political expression in the relatively free time in China's social media. He got "civic education" at early age. He quit using Weibo since 2014 or 2015 when censorship was tightened, "disgusting censorship" in his words.

Ci, and many other respondents who were active on Weibo, were among those Weibo users whose massive reposting created Internet Event and influence on government to take corresponding actions (Dong et al., 2017). Because of tight censorship on Weibo, Ci moved his contentious activities to WeChat when his WeChat contacts became various and large, beyond acquaintance like family, friends, and classmates, after graduation from high school. "Because WeChat is based on real-life contacts", he said. After high school, he liked attending in workshops and reading gatherings, so his real-life contacts broadened to many NGO members, university teachers and social workers. His WeChat profiles turned from posting life moments into reposting "news events that would not be reported by domestic news media," he said. The purpose was to "allow other people to look at some news events from more perspectives. But I dare not say that I am sending

the truth of the news,” he said. He has a clear intention to provide alternative source of information to his contacts.

The “other people,” or the “imagined audience” (Marwick and boyd, 2010) of Ci’s contentious posts and reposts, were his real-life contacts. His contentious activism targeted at those whom he accessed directly online. His activism was also a kind of support to his fellow activists who were also on his WeChat contact list. This brings several new points into current literature of civic engagement.

The first is on the understanding of the spheres of being civic. Most civic literature is inclined to exclude family, colleagues, relatives, and close friends into the sphere of civic engagement. My findings challenge such conceptualization. Tu (2016) has already noticed the “public” function of WeChat and argues that social networks on WeChat are alternative public spheres. My findings support such arguments and add more to it. Ci almost turns his WeChat Moments space into a citizen media space. Here he turned his social contacts from family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and more distant social contacts into the targets of his activism. Other respondents were observed to leave their WeChat and QQ accounts in Douban groups to recruit contacts. According to accounts of multiple respondents, leaving WeChat and QQ accounts was common to see on Douban, Zhihu, Tianya, Baidu Tieba and other public social media platforms. The absorption of strangers into real-life social media contacts and the integration of acquaintances with strangers on such social media space add difficulties to set a clear boundary between spheres of being civic and those of being private. In Ci’s case, the private sphere made up of real-life acquaintance became his activism space. Though his activism was dominantly one-way. Ci said he did not like online discussions and preferred offline ones instead. “Because I think many things are not just black or white. So many debates are not meaningful. Besides, only a few words online can’t completely express a person’s opinions and standpoints. Therefore I prefer face-to-face discussions with a calm state of mind.” Ci pointed out the limitedness of discursive civic engagement, that is, insufficient deliberation.

Secondly, Ci's activism adds on the "acts" of being an activist. When I claim that his social media is somehow like a citizen media, I refer not only to the supervision and watchdog role that the contentious content of his reposts intended to play, but also to the wide variety and miscellany of topics, issues, sources, forms, and techniques to evade censorship, and to the timely engagement with current affairs and hot topical issues. According to my daily observation of his update, the sources of his reposts include public account articles by individuals and non-media organizations, articles by traditional media including some from official media organisations, investigative news reporting from individual journalists, news articles from foreign media, screenshots from Weibo posts, links from Douban, and News app reporting. He did not produce all those contents, of course. He reposted them. Yet, the unseen labours and efforts behind reposting acts are usually missed in civic literature. For example, Svensson points out that clicking, liking, and sharing views and offering support are personal engagement on social media (2016: 51). Ci's activism not only refers to his reposting of contentious content but also to his acts of reading, evaluating, considering, and selecting from his sources. His sources not only included his WeChat contacts, but also his Douban contacts and accounts that he followed. He said he was interested in politics and he regularly read relevant articles and posts on Douban. Ci was like a news agency editor and his contact "reporters" were from contacts and articles he was recommended or searched in different social media platforms. It was a personal work for him, but it was also a personal work based on networked teamwork. Hu said that she searched on Weibo and Douban for feminism information so that she could repost on her Weibo account. For online activists like Ci and Hu, reposting was not by-the-way clicking. It is active acts with intentions and efforts.

Ci's contentious reposts on WeChat Moments revealed a new type of online activism in addition to the discussion and debate model (Yang, 2009). This form of online activism focuses on individual activist's searching, collecting, consolidating and disseminating information or contentious articles by using multiple networked efforts or ego-centric network (Tu, 2016) across different online assemblages or even social media platforms. This online activism

does not aim at debate or discussion but usually one-way dissemination and expression. However, it does not mean that this form of online activism *is* one-way. There are always likings, comments, reposting, and combinations of these functions to interact with activists. But the intention of Ci, at least, was not to invite debate and discussion since he did not think a few words or lines were effective enough as debate or discussion.

Among all my respondents, Ci outstood from other respondents in two ways. One is that he was the one who sent most banned reposts. Sometimes after his reposted articles were banned and inaccessible, he sent screenshots of the articles again, a form of struggle to be explored in Chapter 9. His WeChat timelines showed him as a watchdog of public power, a spokesperson of the vulnerable and those suffering injustices, a supporter of NGOs and civic groups, and a citizen media publisher. The other is that he openly claimed to try to change and influence, though at a narrowly targeted audience. He had a clear intention and civic awareness to balance the mainstream media and influence his real-life contacts.

WeChat Moments is not his sole ground for online activism. He co-hosted WeChat chat group on local old building protection. But there, he was not contentious and radical, but supportive and collaborative.

Ci's online contentious activism reveals some features that explain why he is the way he is. And these features are civic virtues that I try to pin down. He used Douban and Weibo at quite an early age and he loved to meet and talk online with strangers. He used the above two social media originally for information, huge information in his words. He had a strong interest, if not passion, for being informed beyond his physical environment. He used Weibo for information about injustice, taking clicking actions, participating in reposting, being a member of the accumulated efforts with the wish and hope to achieve an end. He was good at translating civic acts between online and offline. Besides, he complemented his online and offline civic acts. His offline face-to-face discussions with a calm state of mind with the same-minded counterparts were more in-depth in reaching complete understanding of each other's opinions and standpoints, and therefore where the differences lied. Whereas his online civic activities provided a

wider range of topics and reached wider audience that he may not be able to cover in offline civic acts. He took his online acts seriously and considered it a cause. He updated almost daily, regularly and consistently in the past year and a half. He showed no obvious favour on special social issues but voicing for all social injustice that he knew. He was critical and sometimes radical. He occasionally openly attacked the party and the system. Combining his online and offline civic acts, he appeared to like to express, share, and discuss. He intended to use social media to achieve an end, as what he said in the above excerpt, participating in collective efforts to bring changes and make good life.

From Ci, except those that have been mentioned earlier, I see civic virtues like sense of justice, sense of mission, civic awareness, intention to change, upright, and brave. These qualities resonate with official codes of conduct for citizens in China that are seen in school textbooks and in government campaigns on official TV advertisements and street posters. The fundamental difference is “Loving the Chinese Communist Party” is the No. 1 official code of conduct whereas Ci was anti-party in his online amateur activism. My conceptualization of civic virtue in this thesis is empirical from grassroots practices. I take the explication of grassroots practiced civic virtues as a dimension of democracy.

Another notable contentious amateur online activist among my respondents is Yu. According to his accounts, his activism was actively seeking and joining multiple issue-based groups on news and current affairs for three purposes: seeking truth; self-enhancing; and participation in debates and discussions, the last echoing Yang’s conceptualization of online activism (2009).

Yu said his interest in online information seeking started in 2007 and was on national and international news and events analysis, opinions and comments on current affairs, muckraking news and information, and controversies and debates as well. He migrated several times from one online social media platforms to another after the “atmosphere of the platform changed”, he said, either because of being filled with Wumao Party or online navy, or because those platforms were filled with entertainment and fun. The sources of his

online information seeking were “Gaoren,” or very wise men, referring to those distinctive grassroots news commenters with insights, expertise, insider information and networks, or other resources that ordinary online goers do not have. These Gaoren are similar to elites and/or public opinion leaders centred around whom Weibo issue-based civic groups form and function (Wang and Shi, 2018), but they are more locally known in a small circle, issue circle, topic circle, or circle of online veterans. Yu said, “there are always news and information that we don’t know and we can’t know. And there are always opinions and voices that we can’t think of,” so, “I want to know in order to achieve a correct understanding of real facts,” he said. “By reading exposures, analysis, comments, opinions and forecast on current affairs home and abroad, I was better informed, kept pace with the trend of the time, and self-enhanced.” Yu was very suspicious of the mainstream media reporting and official channel information, and was well aware of propaganda and ideology in official news rhetoric. He took online information seeking not only as alternative way of “knowing,” but as way of knowing the truth. He took this kind of knowing the truth as enlightenment. He said he was “awakened” by his access of online information and opinions in forums and assemblages. He said he learned to hear different voices, to seek truth, to respect, to treat people equally, to identify information and opinions, to tell apart true information from false ones, and to verify information on his own, sometimes by “getting around the firewall”, or using a proxy, to read foreign media reporting. “Online information sometimes is mixed with exaggeration or nine true information mixing with one false information. You must be able to distinguish and verify. Otherwise, you take them all as true.” Now, he said there was no room for such true information and opinions in online forums, assemblages, and blogs, because of censorship, “So I can only communicate with acquaintances in small circles,” he said. “If everyone is awakened, how can those people survive?” Those people obviously mean the government and its propaganda machine.

This part of Yu’s online activism, or actively seeking information by roaming in different social media platforms and communicating with same-minded as ways of information seeking as well, was kind of “taking-in” for learning and self-education to be a well-informed person, and well-informed by

perceivable truth and facts. Different from the conventional activism as doing to change outside environment or conditions, Yu's online activism was to change self, or self-enhancing in his words. This kind of self-educating activism is not new, but not covered by online activism literature yet.

More than a decade immersion in online news seeking, collecting, discussing, and debating, Yu was educated into a smart political news veteran, or in his word, "sensible". He knew where to go, whom to go to get insider exposures, alternative perspectives, insightful analysis, and in-depth investigations on breaking events and current affairs; he was smart at distinguishing Wumao Party and online navy and found out space without them; he was alert on controversies and debates and participated in them by supporting the side he agreed with. His way of participation was commenting on Weibo posts and on his own Weibo account. His purpose of doing these was to "fight collectively for everyone." He said the fighting was for those who did not know the truth and believed what they saw on TV. The ways of fighting were bringing forward different opinions and voices, finding fault with government's contradictory policies, winning over online navy, and finding means to evade speech control.

Yu did not think he used social media platforms for networking the same-minded, or not in the sense of networking as building contacts and relations. Instead, he was satisfied with being *in* a network, which was set up by mutual following. That is, Yu did not make efforts as he did in his QQ and WeChat chat groups where he hosted, moderated, joined in casual chats every day, and managed as a "cause." In such groups, he said, "We don't talk about sensitive topics here. We talk about food, travelling, books, movies, music, we make friends, find travel mates, and the like." He said he did not join those issue-centred forums and groups for discussions or sharing opinions, but for seeking information, though his comments is a kind of participation. "Most people in the forums and groups think the same way as I do," he said. He said he occasionally replied and commented on posts, "to show support and to add to my own thinking." He said,

“Everyone is living in nudges, it’s enough that we understand each other. Those with background¹⁷ can post in their accounts. I feel myself in a collectivity when commenting on Weibo. We have the same belief to let everyone have a better life. But I don’t contact them. We just follow each other. It’s enough that we express our stands separately. Why should we contact? Those who speak will always speak. There’s no need to organize them together. Too much ideology stuff in a group will make the group be blocked.”

For Yu, avoiding direct and frequent interactions including discussions and sharing opinions with the same-minded in close assemblages was a kind of protection to evade censorship. Evading censorship was both for self-protection and protection of the “collectivity” made up of those who comment on the same post, topics, or issues. Such transient collectivity is a form of online contentious activism in the face of heavy censorship. What add to literature here is the participation of multiple issue-based civic groups (Wang and Shi, 2018) creates loose yet multi-dimensional ego-centric networks through which transient collectivity is created by commenting, liking and reposting. Furthermore, such loose and multi-dimensional ego-centric networks are not only on one social platform, but on several. For Yu, he had such networks on Weibo, and QQ, as far as I know, and he connected the two. On his QQ profile, many of his updates were links or reposts on social affairs from Weibo. Many of these reposts were outspoken political ironies and calls for law, justice, democracy, and criticisms on injustice, authoritarianism, and lack of independent thinking among people. He also posted his own political ironies and radical political expressions on his QQ profile. He was most active and radical on QQ in 2014 and 2015. He had an update saying “In death penalties, 90% percent criminals are from the bottom class of the society. In legal field, it is a consensus that death penalty are the punishments for the poor. Some people call for the abolish of death penalty since it is nearly only for the poor. Some people say that death penalty should be abolished for the poor but remained for the officials. I

¹⁷ People with background is a euphuism for those who have privileged family background or have relationship with the privileged.

support the latter. Officials live on taxpayers' money and should be taken such pressure. If you don't think it's good value to be an official, then don't do it. No one asks you to be an official." His online friend commented on the update as "You are getting bolder. You dare to make such speech." By introducing Weibo reposts to his QQ profile, he turned this "private" personal space into a place for online contentious activism, similar to Ci in the above descriptions.

Since 2016, he had less reposts from Weibo but more short critical comments of his own on social injustice and corrupted party officials. In 2017, he posted his participation in a crowdsourcing charity activity. In early 2020, he called for charity for a school girl, Wu Huayan, dying from hunger and malnutrition in China. He said on QQ in January 2020: "Friends who are dedicated to charity and financially capable please pay attention to Wu Huayan. Once again it is proved that personal participating in charity is most assured. I thus make a wish: speed up charity participation in 2020." He explored new field of civic engagement via online assemblages.

Yu's online contentious activism shows a sense of justice, as Ci. He had a sense of responsibility to take actions for others, though actions were commenting and reposting political content online and helping people offline. He also had a strong urge to be an informative, awakened individual. These are virtues that Confucianism calls for from "the enlightened intellectuals:" be a well-informed and enlightened self first and then serve others afterwards. His activism was not as widely-covered as Ci. For example, he did not stand out for LGBT or Metoo as Ci did. He was not this "progressive" or "open." His focus was on keeping vigilant of public power and injustice from abuse of political power and misconduct of officials. This is a quite traditional style of political concern.

Yu avoided associating tightly with other individuals who he thought were his peers. He was very conscious of and alerted of the risk and danger such associations mean in China. He wanted to be "alive." He did not want to touch the red line of which he is well aware.

The civic virtues detected from Yu's online contentious activism are seeking truth, self-enhancing, responsibility to the collectivity, and altruism, quite in

accordance with Confucian style of virtues. This style of civic virtue does not rest on the concept of Western citizenship, but on being good and enlightened self and taking respectively responsible roles in various social relations, for the end of being an authoritative moral person (Kim, 2012), or a person with good reputation, wide recognition, and power to influence for being moral perfection. This is in resonance with the human excellence conceptualization of civic virtue in Greek tradition as well as the symbiosis of civic virtue for self-excellence and common good.

Similar to Ci and other respondents, no matter how active and critical Yu was online, he had no contentious political participation offline. Their practices bring to fore the accusation of “clicktivism” or “slacktivism” (Svensson, 2016: 49). I argue that civic virtue theory may add a perspective to this debate. According to my findings, online activism serves as means of civic education, fosters civic interest, cultivates civic virtues individually at personal level – that is, different respondents were cultivated differently and they practiced different civic virtues. My findings show that specific acts of online activism, particularly online contentious activism, may not translate to the offline, but civic virtues translate to offline civic engagement. For example, Ci was a core member of a local old building protection group, Yu started doing charities to help poor students, Hu told me she did charities too. Pang (2017) argues that the use of social media promotes offline civic engagements. I argue that civic virtue plays a contributing role.

Different from Ci and Yu, Hu was very active at participating issue-based discussions and debates, both on Weibo and Douban. Her way of participating was not only making comments and reposting but also searching relevant content to comment on and to repost. She said she often argue with those who she did not agree with on the commenting section. Hu’s field of activism was social injustice, particularly on women. She said she often searched on Douban and Weibo for writings, reports, news, and exposures related to injustice victims, events, and policies, and then commented on them and/or reposted them. “Because our attention, comments, or reposts might influence the event in issue,” she said. She had a strong sense of participating to influence and to change. In order to increase such influence, she took advantage of features of social media

platforms. She said her commenting and reposting to increase influence were mainly done on Weibo instead of Douban, "because Douban doesn't have that much influence." She said if she came across some reposts from Weibo on Douban, she would go back to the original posts on Weibo and then made comments there. She said, "The act that can contribute to making influence is to make comments on hot posts. Of course, reposting contributes to influence as well. But influence is not based on individual reposting." Besides, when she wanted to increase the influence of a repost concerning a social issue or event of her concern, she would search the post with most comments or retweets, made her comments or reposted it, and usually commented more than once to interact with others' comments. "I think by far there's no any other social media platform that has as much high frequency of interaction as Weibo. That is, many posts on Weibo have many comments, the amount of comments is large enough to be called heated and effective discussions This is rarely seen on Douban and WeChat Moments." Because of the perceived influence of Weibo, Hu said she posted or reposted daily on Weibo on social issues of her concern. And because group chats in WeChat chat groups and WeChat Moments are not perceived as having the same influence as Weibo, Hu said she did not like participating in WeChat group chats on social issues and she did not repost relevant articles on her WeChat Moments either. This explains why she had only a few reposts on her WeChat Moments throughout my observation period. She said: "What I send on my Weibo account can be accessed beyond my followers. Because it has a content-matching function. That is, because of some key words in my posts, my posts may be recommended to those who have similar concerns as I." The possibility that her posts and reposts on Weibo may reach more people fits her intention to increase influence.

On her Weibo account, where she had around 500 followers, I observed that almost two-thirds of her posts and reposts in the observation period were comments and even criticisms on specific social events or reposts of seeking helps, social injustice, and anything concerning women's right and injustice. She regularly reposted a feminist's account that she followed who had thousands of followers. The content of those reposts varied from academic writings on feminism theories to detailed problematic financial

statements of a provincial Red Cross when it was in donation scandal. The major concern of these reposts were criticisms and exposures of injustice towards women in China, including injustice policies, regulations, stereotyped perspectives in media reporting, and events in life. A quick look at this person's timeline on Weibo showed that many of her posts were reposts too. Reposting is the major means to amplify influence and build network of mutual support between activists on social media.

Hu described the importance of those that she followed like this person: "The discussions of some bloggers made me repeatedly confirm some of my feminism beliefs. Their influences on me are technical, that is, they made me reflect and change the way of thinking. For example, I train myself to think: how much is this person's grievance because of gender?" She not only got information and opinion from the online, she learned to reflect and self-train. In addition to the argument that issue-centred online civic group mobilizes and helps improve civic skills of the members as followers of elite or opinion maker bloggers (Wang and Shi, 2018), my findings add here that such assemblages have technical influence on members on the way they think about the issue and the way they talk about the issue. Furthermore, she said social media is a place where she could find someone to talk about her feminism beliefs and a safe place to express without too many acquaintances. "In real life, I talk with friends who are also interested in feminism. We talk about it when our chats happen to touch it. We don't intentionally talk about feminism." Intentional civic talks occurred online, with the same-minded people in the form of online assemblage. For Hu, safety is to express her feminism beliefs and activism outside her social networks. Different from Chuan who said safety to do political talk is with intimate fellow activists, Hu did not have real-life intimate fellow activists. Her fellow activists were in issue-based online assemblages. She showed no intention to turn her real-life friends into fellow activists, as well as no intention to turn her online fellow activists into stable contacts. In this respect, she was similar to Yu. Both of them did not want to network online issue-based fellow activists into collective actions. They preferred random collective actions. Hu said: "I think making comments on one Weibo posts is like a group activity. It's people discussing an event or a topic publicly. The focus here is the

event or an opinion, not the people participating in discussions. I can't imagine the necessity to contact any individual and then have one-on-one communication with the person." Like Ci, "networking" is not building relations with specific persons, but coming to the right online assemblage for access of the right content.

Therefore, issue-centred online assemblages do not help members to organize together for intentional collective actions like collective commenting or reposting to increase influence. This finding extends the argument that issue-centred civic groups on Weibo enhance collective action—collective reposting of the person who they collectively follow—but not between group members (Wang and Shi, 2018) by adding that they may not help enhance the willingness to take intentional collective actions. In terms of intentional and organized collective actions, Hu said, "Fans of idols always do that. They vigorously repost together to enhance popularity, creating very high views and reposts." Hu had her explanations for this phenomenon. "Because they have a goal. Once a person has a goal and wants to achieve this goal, she will be very active to do it. Many other Weibo users just come across a trending topic randomly, and they repost it randomly too. Some of them repost intentionally, but not as well-organized as fans." Lacking the same goal, according to Hu, is the major reason that amateur activist like her does not use online issue-centred assemblage as resources to network same-minded for collective actions. They would rather leave the "organizing" role in the hand of social media platforms. This finding echoes the logic of connective action theory that people take contentious acts based on the organizing role of social media (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; 2013). My findings also have resonance with networked individualism theory (Wellman et. al, 2003) in the sense that amateur online activists are like networked individual activist. These activists, including Ci, Yu, and Hu, made individual efforts by mobilizing various resources they could seek and collect and by doing this they became a component of a collective action. Yet, they did not intend to connect with each other except mutual following in some cases but not always. Like what has been found in Wang and Shi's research, Chinese Weibo users prefer to follow those elite or opinion leader accounts who have more resources and insights than them to follow ordinary users, though they

are the same-minded (2018). In social media age, it is not that people do not have tools to organize together for collective action, it is that people do not have motivations to organize together for collective action. As shown in Yu's case, surveillance and censorship may play a role in lack of motivation for intentionally organized and coordinated collective actions. According to some research, online censorship in China aims at curtailing collective actions including collective expressions rather than at silencing criticism (King et al, 2013). My findings indicate that such curtailing works.

Hu has shown some civic virtues apart from those afore mentioned, most notably is her intention to influence and change, to support, and self-training for better civic skills like better ways to join in discussions.

8.6 Political Talk in a Close Group

The most radically contentious activism is seen in a WeChat chat group on political talk that I observed. The host of the assemblage said the group was set up for sending reposts of articles that he said his team collected, edited, produced, and posted on the team's Weibo accounts. Throughout the observation period, the host sent several reposts every day and these articles were always "subversive" in nature since almost all of them were negative, exposures, critical, anti-communist party, anti-government, and anti-Chinese common sense. The reposts seemed to be naysayers to every institution in China: history, culture, morality, education, higher education, foreign policies, news, economy, entertainment industry, and so on. There were many posts about exposures of scandals of past and contemporary celebrities. There were also exposures of scandals and corruptions of past and contemporary officials. There were many posts providing opposing interpretations of historical figures and events and hot news and current affairs as well. There were also many posts very positive about America and Japan when the anti-America and Anti-Japan national emotions were high. There were also many posts on international news and events that could not be seen in China's media or were not in the standpoint of China's media. There were sometimes reposts about breaking events. In summary, the posts were the other side of what one read on China's mainstream media or topics that would not be seen on China's mainstream media at all. Several

Weibo accounts where the reposts were from were blocked during my observation. There were soon new Weibo accounts seen to publish posts of the same subversive content. Many reposts on breaking events, exposures and criticisms on hot social events were banned soon after being reposted. In the face of very tight censorship on Weibo posts and WeChat reposts, these reposts seemed to confirm the findings that certain degree of criticisms is tolerated on China's Internet since the prime priority is silencing collective expression (King et al, 2013).

As compared with Ci's contentious reposts on his WeChat Moments, the host's reposts were much more wider in concerns, diverse in topics, larger in amount, sensational in headlines, and less in sources since the host said he reposted his teams' work.

Gradually, members started to share reposts of the same subversive nature. The host repeated from time to time that this group was for sharing repost he sent, and members were not allowed to send reposts and to discuss on reposts he sent or anything else. However, the host's rules were never strictly followed. Reposts from members were seen every day and discussions on some political topics were seen from time to time. But whenever there were heated discussions even debates, the host would appear to stop them and said discussions would cause this group to be blocked. There were similar allegations circulated in another WeChat chat group that I observed saying that close-group content was also censored. The host intended to make this assemblage a channel to publish his team's reposts to audience who requested to join. Avoidance of discussions was the No. 1 rule made by the host, though not always followed. The host changed the name of this group several times because he has recruited more and more members exceeding the limit of 500 members set by WeChat. In the end of my observation period, the group was numbered 6 in the host's group list.

The host often sent advertisements to the assemblage. He said he needed money to pay his team members and support team's work. He occasionally sent advertisements of the team's elite membership with which one pays to see better content, as the advertisement said. It is hard to say if this team is

an advocacy group whose fund-raising means is not out of donation or if this team profits out of muckraking content. Hu said there are many We-media making money on Weibo by actively seeking posts sent by ordinary or elite users that they thought may trigger viral trending. The host once sent a repost saying his team was an influential We-media. The commercial involvement in online activism has not been researched yet. In this case, no financial transparency and accountability of the team were seen. This blurs activism and business and adds complexities to online activism in China. Moreover, the host discouraged discussion and debate in order to avoid the assemblage being blocked. He intended to do narrowcast in the assemblage by publishing his content only. This kind of activism is quite common to see on WeChat's public account articles. Among vast diversity of topics from WeChat public account platform, exposing, even sensational reposts with political content are not unusual. Some reposts produced by influential We-media had huge circulations/reposting and were even able to create hot topic and widespread public concern. It is hard to say whether some We-media are advocacy groups or grassroots news outlets or business. Their production, promotion, and circulation of social issues and muckraking reporting blur the line between civic and commercial and more research needs to be done on their influence on civic engagement and political activism.

Though the host discouraged discussions, there were always exchanges of words between members, short discussions from time to time and heated debates occasionally. A dozen of members in this assemblage gave their opinions and evidence to support their opinions or standpoints and some evidence was well-founded and well-documented. Some of them used liberalism theories to support their argument. One member quoted Tocqueville and his *On Democracy in America* to argue against another member's advocacy of democracy. The cued member said "I learn from it. Thank you." More than once when these members reposted some articles, they said "This is reposting. Not verified." They appeared rational, reasonable, and responsible. And they showed courtesy and a controlled manner too. But they were not always active, not as consistent, regular, and long-term as the above described activists like Ci and Hu. I do not know if

they had a smaller chat group like Gong's American soup opera groups did, smaller group emerged from bigger group mentioned in Chapter 5. What arises here is the question on how to conceptualize the signification of such political talk in close assemblage. Research on online political expression in China focuses on open expression in open and public space (Yang, 2003; Song et al, 2016), mass collaboration and participation in forms of massive reposting and commenting (Tai, 2015), and both influence on government to take actions and government's control on such political expressions (Sullivan, 2014). Close assemblages political talk is a very different form of political expression. Owing to the limitation of this research, I cannot further explore such form.

The contention of this assemblage is not only from the subversive reposts, sent both by the host and by many members, but also from the contentious words and attitudes that many members expressed in comments on reposts, exchange of words, short discussions, and heated debates. They revealed very deep disappointment, helplessness and indignation towards the dark side of China: the abuse of power of the top officials and lower rank officials and their family members, injustice, corruptions, censorship, propaganda, lack of freedom and free speech, ignorance of many people, high prices, deteriorating economic situations, and the danger of revival of Cultural Revolution. There were attacks on the system, on top leader, on the illegal acts of the Chinese Communist Party, for example, putting party flag ahead of the national flag on National Parade, and emphasizing the Party ahead of the country. There were longings for democracy and admiration of American democracy expressed from members from time to time. There were also reports about censorships they witnessed or got to know. This is not only a political talk assemblage, it is also a political critical assemblage.

Some members appeared to be "veteran" online assemblage users like Yu. They mentioned the "good time" in Tianya Forum. They used slang words popular among veteran forum users. They talked about the relatively open and free time then when "some active users sent post late at night" with "very bold" remarks though some of those remarks were removed overnight. These members were well-informed, and they usually commented on in-depth analysis of national and international events with perspectives from

political theories. Among them were two members who once said “We are here for truth and fact. We seek truth and rationality.” And “We must remain calm and rational.” They sought Habermas public sphere style of political talk (1989) in this close assemblage. Very occasionally they succeeded. The rarity of such success was partly due to the host’s repeatedly “curbing” of discussion and debate. Rational discussions and debates became the atmosphere of this group for only a very short period.

A few elite members emerged in the assemblage. They were active, insightful, resourceful, and well-respected by other members. One such member was very good at pointing out the propaganda format in mainstream media reporting and reinterpreting the “real” message in his way. He was well respected in the assemblage and several members wanted to develop “private chats” with him, though he declined. In the annual Lianghui¹⁸ in February 2019, there were quite heated discussions on the constitutional change that removed the restrictions on terms of re-election in the assemblage. This member reinterpreted mainstream media reporting every day and he won admirations from fellow members. In one of his messages, he said “The institutional reform this time reinforces the Party’s control on ideology and media, further solidifying party-government. In a certain sense, this is serious retrogression! Political institutional reform is completely hopeless!” He demonstrated a long-term concern as an observer on China’s political reform. He was the kind of grassroots “Gaoren”, or amateur expert in a field, that Yu admired, as mentioned earlier.

Several elite members won respect because of their technical and language skills and resources in accessing foreign websites and media reporting. When Chinese officials visited U.S for trade talk in the trade war, a member had a “live broadcasting” of the itinerary of China’s delegates. Two young man were very used to using VPN and they became verifiers of some information. Every time someone posted videos or “breaking news” on

1. ¹⁸ National People’s Congress and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, the most important political events in China

natural disasters, protests, and mass gatherings, they quickly googled to verify if those videos or pictures were true. Sometimes they said, "That is a picture two years ago" and sent the screenshots of where the pictures appeared two years ago. Sometimes they asked, "What's the weather like in where the mass gathering occur?" They were very careful with the validity of such news or information. These information sharing and verifying acts add some elements of collaborative actions in the assemblage beyond a political talk assemblage.

There were heated debates that developed into quarrels. Dirty words were used and sometimes personal attacks were seen. A couple of members left the assemblage in anger. One said "I kept very few chat groups. I think this one is nice and tolerant. I'm too disappointed." This echoes the findings that emotional discussions are frequent in ordinary people's political talk (Song et al, 2016). Rational and emotional political talk was both seen in this assemblage but were from different "sub-group" of members. When members of the two sub-group disagreed, the rational side lost the battle. Every time when there were squabbles, there would be members to calm them down. Some would say "Don't argue. You may cause trouble for the host. This group may be blocked." This kind of self-censor among members was seen from time to time. In fact, self-censor was seen widely in my respondents and in my sites of observation. My findings are that self-censor discouraged some people to talk, express, and share political content but not necessarily discouraged them from accessing such content. Some of my respondents did not show any access to political content because they were not interested in them.

Members in this assemblage were found to have diverse social status. There were farmers, soldiers, public servants, IT staff, nurse, medical industry workers, and so on. Besides, I found they came to this assemblage with different purposes. Some wanted to hear plural voices and opinions. Some came for insightful opinions and interpretations. Some were for sharing and some for getting. Some were here for expressing discontent, some for rational discussion, and some for exposing the injustice that she witnessed or heard. Each active member contributed to the assemblage and turned it into a "public" space, through their discursive interactions, in the sense of

both diverse personal purposes and preferences and common interest in subversive information and interpretations, though in a close assemblage. The sense of public also comes from the fact that members were all anonymous strangers for each other. This kind of online public space in close assemblages has been rarely noticed by researchers.

What I observed in these group members quite fits Yang's (2009) conceptualization of online activism as daily political discussions and debates online, though not daily in frequency. The contentious political discussions and debates between active members were usually brief, random, irregular and inconsistent, partly due to the host's curbing of such discussions and debates. Such discussions and debates were buried in reposts both sent by the host and members whose topics were various and diverse but not plural in stands. They were unanimously critical and subversive, but not balanced in giving the other side or more sides of the story. Whereas in occasional discussions and debates, I saw balanced views and the efforts to find out truth by being objective, and the collective efforts to build on a topic by providing different perspectives from some members. However, the curbing of political discussions and debates by the host and self-censor of some members limited its dynamics. Moreover, I did not see any hint for influencing or changing social issues in these discussions and debates. It was mostly at expressive level. Political expression in close assemblages calls attention to such new form of online political activity.

8.7 Theorizing

Online activism literature either argues the role of online activism, facilitated by social media technological affordances, in increasing civic virtue (Wang and Shi, 2018) or leaves no space for civic virtue at all (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Zhang, 2014). The former takes online activism-civic virtue relationship for granted and the latter relies on social media technological affordances on connecting people and enabling people to do what they can do. My findings bridge this gap by showing a symbiotic relationship between online activism and civic virtue. Online activism in the form of consistent, systematic, and usually intentional participation in public-concerned online

collective activities, both cultivates civic virtues and is sustained by citizens' civic virtues. This is seen in analysis of my activist respondents, but also seen in non-activist respondents not mentioned in this chapter. Most respondents had either contentious or uncontentious online activism for a while in some stage of their life or had acts of online activism from time to time. But they did not go on or consist in doing so. Long-term online activism is built on civic virtues.

What are considered as civic virtues is a collective project. From ancient Greek and Roman philosophers and political theorists to contemporary thinkers and theorists, proposals on what can be considered civic virtues have centred on one question: what are good citizens and/or members in a community, as big as the whole globe and as small as a neighbourhood. The proposals made have been based on epochal and contextual conditions. In contemporary Western political thinking, the centring question is: what are good citizens for democracy? In this research, the centring question emerged from my data: what are good for long, consistent, and public-concerned collective actions taken in various forms of online assemblages? Public, as seen in Chapter 7, has many dimensions out of dynamic interactions between collective efforts and social media technological affordances. Therefore, civic virtues sustaining online activism are also diverse.

Besides, the dynamic interaction between individuals and social media technological affordances facilitates multiple forms of online activism conducted by a person. Therefore, a person engages different online activism with different civic virtues, or local civic virtues in particular assemblages. But there are some civic virtues universal in a person for which ever online activism she engages: curiosity to outside world beyond immediate environment, vigorous online information seeking for self-educating, participating by commenting and reposting, and above-mentioned time, consistency, and public concern.

My findings draw a picture of nuanced online activism, conducted by citizens with various civic virtues by using enabling social media technological affordances, or idiosyncratic multiple forms of online activism that social

media and civic virtue co-facilitate. A question then arises: is using of social media technological affordances for public-concerned purpose a civic virtue in this social media age, or as some said, socially-networked-society (Zúñica et al, 2012)? The answer emerged from my data seems to be yes. Yet, a notable thing from my data in this respect is that amateur activists seem to be content with very loose or even transient collective actions in the online. It is not that they did not have chance to meet the same-minded or they did not have means to network. They did not intend to network the same-minded for organized collective actions. This is partly due to what Hu pointed out: they did not have a goal; and partly due to tight censorship and self-censorship to be explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 9

Civic Virtue and Internet Event

9.1 Introduction

So far, I explore the broadening of the dimensions of the civic and civic space by my respondents' routine and patterned uses of multiple online assemblages, that is, recurrent "specific instances of situated action" (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011: 1241). Individual situated actions, or practices of multiple online assemblage participation, were found to have some patterns among my respondents. However, the specific content that individual respondents browsed, produced, reposted, and interacted at specific instances were usually vastly diverse. Throughout my fieldwork, I also observed another kind of specific instances of situated actions which were less recurrent but occasional instead. These occasional individual actions in multiple online assemblages so concentrated on one event, topic, theme, or circumstance that they appeared as common concern on common content. Massive individuals' common concern on common content appeared as collective actions. I argue that such specific instances explicate latent patterns and situational civic virtue in particular. In this chapter, I unpack the biggest Internet event in years in China and describe civic virtues either highlighted or emerged in special circumstance. This special circumstance sees blending of the social and the civic in social media practices. I then theorize my findings which include intensifying participation, breaking norms, cross-platform mobility of people and porter of content, breaking stereotype, self-regard, self-censorship, and censorship.

9.2 Internet Event Literature

There are different scales of collective actions in China's social media. Smaller scale is called Shuaping, or flooding the screen because of similar content; and bigger scale is conceptualized as Internet event, or high sentiment in online public opinion catching online censorship and government's responses (Dong et al, 2017: 726). Social media events in the West are conceptualized by Dong et al (2015: online version) as "real world happenings that are reflected by data", that is, people share their feeling and discuss their experiences on social media about offline popular events (Monteiro de Lira et al, 2019). Whereas China's Internet events are more than that. Many Internet events in China are aggregates of online sentiment on events that had very few mainstream media reporting, and public

discussions enabled by legacy mass media are not available, feasible, or permitted. Increasingly online public discussions are more and more difficult. However, one after another surging online public opinions are still seen in China, contributing to the arguments of the emergence of online public sphere (Dong et al, 2017; Xie et al, 2017) and contentious public sphere (Lei, 2018) and the function of online collective actions to challenge the state (Zheng and Wu, 2005). Internet events are conceptualized as main cases and configurations of Chinese Internet users' collective online political participation that are effective to trigger government responses and are usually used as case studies to look at political activism on China's Internet (Jiang, 2014; Liu, 2015; Tai, 2015; Wu and Yang, 2015; Zheng and Yu, 2016).

The formation of online collective action on social media for and as means of citizens' political participation is a common research topic (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Wang and Chu, 2019). What makes studies on China's Internet event special is the specific authoritarian context in China, which means freedom of information flow, expression, association, and collective action, as well as the interaction between policy-makers and citizens' voices cannot be taken for granted as literature on democracies do. Online collective action may be one more means of political participation in democratic countries whereas in China it may be the only means and occasion for many non-activist people to voice their concerns and have their voices "heard and responded" thanks to government surveillance on online sentiment in order to curb online collective actions (King et al, 2013). Therefore, Internet event becomes a political mechanism with Chinese characteristics: the emergence of Internet event is the "failure" of online censorship and success of Internet users to break censorship and suppression of reposting and information sharing. In this sense, Internet event is the result of collective online "struggle" or contentious activity against censorship and content suppression.

A less contentious perspective on Internet event argues that Internet events on social media supervise governmental judiciary and other public power, maintain and protect disadvantaged groups, urge governmental informational publicity and promote institutional change (Dong et al, 2017: 726). Internet event is argued as an effective means to bring political and policy changes in China.

Yet, neither current literature on the role of social media in collective actions in democracies nor literature on China's Internet events on social media pay

attention to the role of civic virtue in collective actions or Internet event. Instead, participants in online collective actions are pre-assumed as citizens and participation is pre-assumed as fulfilling the role or identity as citizens. And citizens in these pre-assumptions are conceptualized as the political rights and responsibilities of individuals in democracies. What is explicated from my finding is that amateur activist respondents were seen civic awareness and self-efficacies, or intentions to take civic and/or political actions to bring changes, and civic virtues to make efforts to take actions throughout my observation period. Whereas non-activist respondents showed civic awareness, civic self-efficacies and civic virtues to make efforts to take actions only in the time of Internet event. Non-activist respondents practiced citizenship in Internet event by breaking routine patterns and norms of social media online assemblage participation and demonstrated circumstantial and temporary civic virtues.

I have witnessed many small-scale Shuaping and several big online events throughout my observation period. The latter includes the trade war between China and the U.S., Metoo social movement, the phenomenal popularity of web series adapted from a same-sex romance novel, Hong Kong demonstrations, and the coronavirus outbreak. Among these big online events, the trade war between China and the U.S. and Hong Kong demonstrations were observed many banned reposts and public account articles on WeChat and banned reposts on Weibo, but there were no publicly announced corresponding government policy changes. The banned information was mainly descriptions of what happened from various sources. The rest big online events are typical Internet events because they resulted in observed government responses or policy changes.

Among my respondents, very few of them were observed to participate in those small-scale Shuaping events on WeChat. Small-scale Shuaping were usually created out of the homophily of one's social contacts. In terms of larger online events, Ci, Lee and Fa were observed being active in sending reposts concerning Metoo social movement and Ci was active in sending reposts about Hong Kong demonstrations as well. The readers group on WeChat were observed exchanges of remarks on the trade war between China and the U.S. and Hong Kong demonstrations. Fans groups were active in discussing and supporting the web series adapted from a same-sex romance novel. As most respondents said in the interviews, they reposted or talked about topics in online groups out of interest. So different personal interests contributed to different collective actions reflected from my

respondents. Yet, none of these personal interest-driven Internet event has triggered so wide range of online acts among my respondents as well as the general social media users in China as the coronavirus outbreak in early 2020, which was a public health emergency crisis that almost got everybody involved. I eye-witnessed the largest Internet event in China in years. Therefore, I use the early stage of this event, or the first month of the public explosion of the outbreak in February 2020, as a case to examine continuities and changes in terms of civic virtue reflected from my respondents in social media assemblage participation in Internet event.

Non-organization-organized mobilization is a key concern in research on social media collective actions—including both collective actions on social media and offline collective actions facilitated by social media—and there are different arguments on factors contributing to successful mobilizations, for example, personalized content sharing in media networks (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), personal traits of starters who lead followers (Margetts et al, 2015), political information as a main component of public activism communication on social media (Mercea et al, 2020), and type of issue or issue opportunity structure (Yang, 2016). Social media users' communication behaviours like concerns on public issues, habitual social media uses, and willingness to monitor government are also found to positively correlated to social media participation in public emergency events (Xie et al, 2017). What my findings add to the literature is consistent civic virtues seen from amateur activist respondents and temporary civic virtues observed from non-activist respondents configured out of intensifying participation which broke their routine patterns of social media online assemblage participation and became links between the daily and the breaking.

9.3 Intensifying Participation

Social media event detection research explores emergence of online events by looking at surging data on specific event or topic (Dong et al, 2015: online version; Monteiro de Lira et al, 2019). The surging of data, from my ethnographic observational perspective on individual respondents in coronavirus outbreak, was unprecedented dynamics of interactions on social media assemblages in terms of increasing frequencies of posting and reposting of coronavirus outbreak-related content, immersing in social media online assemblages for outbreak-related information, interacting in online assemblages on outbreak-related topics, expressing personal feelings,

exposing personal experiences, and sharing eye-witnesses as well as accessed information resources. The emergence of Internet event is explicated by the sudden break of daily pattern of social media practices.

The most obvious sign of breaking normal pattern is the exponential growth of user-generated content on Chinese social media. Since 21 January 2020, one day after Chinese officials admitted publicly the outbreak of coronavirus, WeChat chat groups and WeChat Moments were boiling, so was Weibo and hot trending on Weibo. Among my respondents, half of them were observed more active than usual. 12 respondents were observed to update more often than their daily time with content relevant to the outbreak on their social media profiles. Four respondents doubled their updates with reposts of circumstantial content. Other four participants who used to be quite quiet now updated with reposts more frequently than usual. Since 21 January, the day that coronavirus epidemic spread in China was exposed, Ci posted 91 times in his WeChat Moments until 16 February in contrast to his usually one or two updates each day. Active contributions to the growth of user-generated content concerning the outbreak became a civic virtue in forming collective dynamics of the event and topic. And active contributions bring breaking norms seen in everyday uses.

9.4 Breaking Norms in Assemblage Interactions

Besides expressing concerns in social media updates, some respondents were observed active in assemblage interactions. Changes of breaking normal pattern were seen in almost every active assemblage. In the eight online assemblages that I observed, three had already been in dormant before this public event. And they did not revive. The rest five assemblages all engaged in discussions relating to the outbreak, though in very different dynamics and patterns.

The least changes were observed in the largest calligraphy group on Douban. There was no obvious change of amount and content of post each day during this public event. The majority of the posts and comments on posts were still on calligraphy, suggesting that hobby assemblages may largely be as normal. Yet, posts and comments on the outbreak and outbreak-related news were seen from time to time. On the first day of exposure of the outbreak, a post titled “Oh, I can only sign” was seen accompanied with a picture on a calligraphy work about a well-known Chinese political poem. The post got no comments. On the day that the death of Dr Li Wenliang was widely known, a post said, “I can’t calm down.”

In the peak time of the outbreak, dozens of posts were titled in relation to the outbreak: self-isolation, blessings, complaints, support, and several parodied pictures, political ironies and outspoken criticisms on People's Daily, the China's Communist Party newspaper, for its "improper" reporting. Several members joined a short discussion and expressed dissatisfaction with the newspaper's Weibo post on explaining broomchallenge¹⁹, accusing its post of distraction.

It is not surprising to see such few, indirect, and controlled expression in this assemblage of calligraphy hobbyists on Douban. As suggested in Chapter 6, the norm of fixed range of topics in online assemblages is adhered to as a civic virtue. Instead, this is the first time that topics irrelevant to calligraphy were posted. Though small scale, these posts showed that some social media users individualistically brought their voices and concerns to online spaces by breaking norm of adhering to preconceived ranges of topics or themes. In the case of coronavirus outbreak, such breaking practices became civic virtue for mobilizing dynamic, strengths and forces of online collective actions into Internet event.

The hottest discussions I observed were on Weibo and WeChat and QQ chat groups, the former in large-scale openly public way and the latter two in small-scale but networked public way. As will be seen in the following section on cross-platform participation, WeChat was like a terminal of information form many social media platforms, fan firing interactions. A post in my WeChat Moments said on 26 January: "All of my WeChat chat groups are finally calm down. I have been bombarded with all kinds of rumours and inside information," suggesting special dynamic of close-circle social networks and mixed assemblages of strangers and acquaintance in WeChat chat groups in becoming one of main sites for satisfying information need argued as a key factor of people's involvement in public emergency crisis (Xie et al, 2017). As is widely known now, the late Dr Li Wenliang sent his first warning on outbreak of coronavirus in his WeChat alumni group. The "legitimacy" of WeChat chat group as a formal political communication space was explicated by a picture shown by a member of the readers group, a WeChat chat group that I observed. The picture, posted on 8 February, was a document with the red seal, the Village Regulations on Epidemic

¹⁹ A social media meme that users upload pictures and videos to show their brooms stand on its own because of allegedly gravitational full announced by NASA.

Prevention Work, of a village near Wuhan. The last line of this temporary regulations went: Since it is a special period of time, this village regulation can be implemented immediately after voting in the WeChat chat group of villagers' representatives. On the regulation is a list of fines on improper conduct during the epidemic period. For example, fining 100 yuan per time for not wearing face mask when leaving home; fining 300 yuan per time for gathering together to chat.

Though little researched as social media platforms to generate collective actions in Internet event (Brunner, 2017; Xie et al, 2017), QQ and WeChat as combinations of communication, socializing, working, and leisure became two of major sites of collective actions in coronavirus outbreak, in addition to the dominantly argued sites of Internet event—Weibo and political forums in China (Tkacheva et al, 2013; Dong et al, 2017). Other platforms in China were important for generating collective actions too in the outbreak, as seen from some respondents' cross-platform participation.

9.5 Mobility and Content Porter Across Platforms

Cross-platform uses of social media online assemblages were common practices found among my respondents. Yet, this phenomenon has been little researched except cross-platform comparison of social media content (Lin et al, 2016; Ben-David and Soffer, 2019; Yarchi et al, 2020). What I found is the integration of social media platforms in China and the mobility or “flow” of users as well as content in the integrated platforms. Such mobility is especially intensive in coronavirus outbreak, contributing to the integration of collective actions and sentiment across platforms and accelerating the dynamic and influence of Internet event.

The integration of China's social media platforms is twofold. Firstly, it is technological. Technologically, many Chinese social media platforms are connected through the “Sharing” function. One can access Weibo link, Douban link, Zhihu link and Baidu Tieba on WeChat, and vice versa. I saw links of the above platforms and many apps, like those of news, music, video, reading, and more sent by respondents in the observation period.

Secondly, the integration is user-enabled too. This not only means that respondents used the sharing function to transport content from one platform to another, it also means that they used screenshots and hyperlinks to send cross-platform content. That is, even if there were no technological affordances, for example, in the rare cases of extreme censorship in the

early stage of coronavirus outbreak, users sent cross-platform content anyway. Moreover, I saw some respondents left their WeChat and/or QQ accounts in Douban, Baidu Tieba, Tianya Forum and Zhihu, attracting strangers to their chat groups. In this way, platform integration brings connection of people's real-life social network and online network or networks. The influence of such connection was found twofold. On the one hand, the channels of content flow were opened across platforms, social media assemblages, and real-life and online networks. On the other hand, respondents became the junctions and controllers of the channels of content flow. This added to respondents' agency to seek, integrate, and circulate information between online assemblages, social media platforms, and online networks. It is a personal agency dependent on online collaboration, though. It is a collaboration-dependent agency.

This agency is most explicit in the outbreak period. In both respondents' social media profiles and their posts in online groups, I saw outbreak-related comments and reposts from diverse social media platforms: official media's news apps; commercial media's news apps; individual's and organizations' WeChat public account articles; WeChat individuals' profile updates; group discussions from WeChat chat groups; Douban diaries, articles, and group interaction content; organizations and individuals' Twitters; Weibo posts, articles, comments and replies; Zhihu questions and replies; Baidu Tieba group interactions; and screenshots of all the above. Among these content integrations, WeChat particularly became an information hub and exchange centre.

Using the agency to transport outbreak-related information became a civic virtue in this Internet event because of the positive results that such transport brought. Firstly, since many of the social media platforms mentioned above have the "live tracing of hot word" function, the flow of outbreak-related content across platforms contributed to turn hot words into "one voice" or several voices as well as to amplify this voice or these voices on each social media platform. Similar voices across social media platforms accelerated the dynamic of this Internet event. As quoted above, whichever social media platform one turned to in the first month of the outbreak, she encountered outbreak-related content, most of which was user-generated negative information. Such density of content was partly due to intensified participation as suggested above, and partly due to the transport of content across social media platforms.

Thirdly, unlike the “I’m interested in it” or personal interest motivations to repost public concern content observed in respondents’ daily uses of social media assemblages, cross-platform transport of outbreak-related content was out of intentional acts with civic awareness and self-efficacies. They were configurations of respondents and other content porters’ practicing of citizenship.

Lastly, content transport across social media platforms created a kind of democratic phenomena: vast diverse exposures of outbreak-related information, vast diverse expressions of outbreak-related opinions, and encounters of such vast diverse exposures and expressions, which, as will be seen next, helped explicate some civic virtues that were never observed before.

9.6 Breaking Stereotype and Self-regard

Throughout the first month of coronavirus outbreak, I observed apparent changing patterns of social media assemblage behaviours among my respondents, particularly the non-activist respondents. Nine respondents only updated outbreak relevant reposts. They did not post or repost on the variety of topics that they usually did including posts on their daily life activities and personal trivial. Four respondents who seldom post “serious” content, or content about social and political issues, reposted articles and news on the outbreak. Kang and Dai who usually filled their WeChat Moments either with advertising their own company or business or with pictures of food and travelling now sent outbreak related posts and reposts. Kang reposted coronavirus news and prevention measures almost every day.

The two senior respondents, who always reposted public account articles and news with official perspective from a few public accounts, sent reposts with more and diverse perspectives, voices, modalities, and sources. They and several other respondents commented some articles that they reposted, which was rarely seen in their previous reposts. They did not say anything critical. They either picked up a few sentences from their reposts or made some emotional remarks.

Non-activist respondents showed unseen interest and concern beyond stereotype uses of social media assemblages and self-regard as well. I argue the breaks of stereotype and self-regard are civic virtues in contributing to the biggest Internet event like coronavirus outbreak. Breaking

stereotype and self-regard led to unprecedented participation in online social movement and collective actions which formed Internet event. They also explicated these respondents' civic awareness and intention to concern, voice, express, resonate, and change, therefore, practicing citizenry. They demonstrated some respondents' temporary civic virtues unseen in daily time.

However, the breaking of stereotype and self-regard was not radical. The content that my respondents reposted showed huge diversity and plurality of focus, perspectives, standpoints, and concerns varying from scientific analysis of the virus to folk ways of self-protection, from blaming the government to muckraking the municipal Red Cross, from calling for donation to civil society's charities to daily updating the figures of the infectious and the death toll. The respondents who were critical were still or even more critical whereas those breaking stereotype and self-regard were largely uncritical. What united them was the concerns on the outbreak and the condolence on the death of Dr Li Wenliang who was conceptualized by online sentiment as whistle-blower of exposing the outbreak. Another similarity between them is the break of self-censorship and censorship in reposting forbidden content.

9.7 Breaking Self-Censorship and Censorship

One post sent by one of my contacts said on 12 February, "Whichever social media platform I go these days, they are full of negative information." Such density of negative information in China's social media platforms were in sharp contrast to the official mainstream media reporting on the outbreak, which were always positive on praising government's efforts in dealing with emergency and supporting those affected, as always. The negative information was fully generated mainly by three parties: ordinary individual users' accounts of what they witnessed, heard, talked about, and read about; individual users' interactions in online groups; and investigative reporting from several market media which were quickly and hugely reposted. The negative information echoes a popular short video clip during the outbreak "Do You Hear the People Sing" that I saw from Ci's WeChat update as well as updates of many other contacts, forming a large scale Shuaping which was daily seen in the days of coronavirus outbreak.

Do you hear the people sing?
Singing the songs of angry men?

It is the music of the people
Who will not be slaves again!

The negative information echoes grassroots voices from people themselves, parallel to the “public opinion” manufactured by mainstream media. There has long been argument of two public opinion fields: one is the mainstream public opinion field and the other is the oral public opinion field on ordinary people’s lips (Nan, 2003). In the past, this grassroots public opinion was heard in taxi drivers’ chats with passengers, in private talks between friends, families, and colleagues (ibid). Now, they were seeded, brewed, and exploded online. Since 6 February, after the whistle-blower Dr. Li Wenliang was officially announced dead, the widely reported by Western media “widespread online anger” was felt on my respondents’ WeChat Moments, QQ profiles, Weibo accounts, and chat groups.

Both widespread online anger and dense negative information were possible with people’s breaking of self-censorship on online speeches. Tkacheva et al (2013) argue that Chinese legal regulations on Internet were “designed to compel Chinese netizens to self-censor” though Roberts (2018) argues that self-censorship was a strategy taken by Chinese government to deter journalists, opinion leaders and activists whereas for typical Internet users, Chinese government used the porous censorship strategies. My findings are that most of my respondents had very strong awareness of self-censorship in their daily uses of social media. Most respondents, including most activist respondents, showed that they knew very well what they could say and what they couldn’t on their social media accounts and groups, and they did accordingly by avoiding sending forbidden content in online spaces that were surveilled. Besides, they took prevention measures to avoid being punished for producing “improper” content on their account updates and in their social media groups. For example, remarks on forbidding to send some content “in order to avoid the group being blocked” was common to see in the WeChat chat groups I observed. Besides, some respondents showed self-censorship by showing awareness of “saying the right thing in the right space.” For instance, several respondents mentioned that comments in Weibo were not censored so that they made critical comments there instead of other social media spaces.

My respondents’ awareness and initiatives to take self-censorship in publishing social media content were from their frequent encounters with censorship on social media content. They mentioned deletion of Weibo posts and reposts, blocked WeChat public account articles, and blocked

access to links of content from other social media platforms that they experienced personally. They also mentioned they saw such kind of information and experience shared by their social media contacts, followers, assemblage members, and in public account articles. Sharing censorship experiences is a common practice in social media assemblages. I witnessed expressions of indignation about block of Weibo account on WeChat updates and sharing of blocking WeChat chat group in QQ group I observed. Censorship on social media content is both a “common sense” and a ridiculed target and topic. Some public account articles had “Read it now or it will be soon inaccessible” on its headline or lead paragraph as means to advertise negative content and to arrest attentions.

Yet, self-censorships expressed and observed from my respondents’ daily uses of social media were broken in their online expressions in the early stage of coronavirus outbreak. Half of my respondents were observed to break self-censorship in three ways: reposting forbidden content (including re-reposting transformed content whose previous form was blocked already); sending reposts with broader range of voices from more variety of sources; and discussing outbreak -related information in chat groups.

The most notable is the two senior respondents who seemed to “join” those much younger who sent reposts being deleted or forbidden access and in greater variety of presentational forms: 11 of Xuan’s reposts were deleted and 4 of Wai’s. Among the deleted was one of the most widely spread articles “The Last Words of a Mortal Dr Li Wenliang”. Dr Li’s death is believed to trigger the widespread anger on China’s social media and the subsequent measures taken by Chinese government including removing several top provincial officials. All these deleted articles were not media reporting but public account articles by individuals. Some of these articles were critical but some were accounts of the author’s eye-witnesses, concerns or worries. Xuan and Wai, for the first time throughout the fieldwork, sent Douban diaries, screenshots, and Weibo links other than the unanimous WeChat public account articles in their previous timelines. This is the only time that I saw resonance between the two senior respondents and Ci on what they reposted.

Breaking self-censorship would only appear to be online activism if there were no abnormally tight censorship on social media content in the coronavirus outbreak period. Yet, throughout this online public event, abnormally tight and the largest-scale ever censorship turned such online

activism into political struggle. Social media users, including half of my respondents, played “cat and mouse” with censorship.

Censorship has been tightened since this project started. Yet, censorship on social media content reached climax in this Internet event. As usual, there were mainly two ways of censorship: deletion of content, account, and assemblage; and temporary blocking of certain social media functions. For the former, deletion of content was a routine. Yet, the large scale of deletion of content in the outbreak period was unseen. Since the coronavirus epidemic spread in China was exposed, 27 of Ci’s 57 reposts was blocked among his 91 updates between 21 January and 16 February. On Hu and Fa’s Weibo profiles, banned reposts were a common scene. In the readers’ group, a large majority of the host’s posts couldn’t be opened minutes after the posts being sent. Again and again members sent requirements like “Please could the host send that article again? I can’t open it.”

Block of personal account on Weibo and WeChat was heard and seen from time to time. I came across several times that my WeChat contacts said in their updates that their Weibo accounts were “exploded.” A friend told me that his WeChat account was blocked after he sent a post saying “The mayor of Wuhan must be dismissed.” And when the mayor of Wuhan was really dismissed a few days later, his WeChat account went back to normal.

Blocking online assemblages was always a threat and a main reason for self-censorship. In Yu’s QQ chat group, a member sent a message during the outbreak period saying that “A friend of mine said one of his WeChat chat groups was blocked. He sent messages to the group. But he can’t see the updates from group members.” When a member sent a picture with a girl holding a paperboard with “Freedom of Speech” in both Chinese and English on it and commented “What a brave girl”, another active member replied “Don’t send such picture to this group. There is risk that this group be blocked.” Another member sent a message which said “The Douban Life group was blocked.” The host of the readers’ group reiterated again and again that discussions might cause the group to be blocked. He said more than once that some other of his such WeChat chat groups were blocked.

The blocking of certain social media functions was not so common.

Throughout the observation, Ci once sent a repost saying that Douban’s broadcasting function was temporarily blocked. During the outbreak, for the first time ever, I came across reposting forbidden. The reposting function of WeChat was blocked temporarily. When I wanted to repost an article titled “Human suffering: how millions of underclass people suffer in the outbreak

period” on 31 January and clicked on “repost” function, a page saying “This article is against the WeChat public platform operation specifications, the article is forbidden from sharing.” When I told friends about this, a friend said “This is not the first time WeChat forbade sharing.”

The integration of different social media platforms was often disabled in the outbreak. The links to Weibo, Douban and Zhihu were often blocked in the updates that some participants post in their profiles and in the assemblage interactions too.

In the face of tighter and large-scale censorship, respondents and their online group members showed apparent awareness of such censorship. Yet, they continued reposting and/or talking about outbreak -related content. When some respondents found their reposts were inaccessible, they reposted the same post again. Or, they reposted in ways that were tried to evade censorship.

The most usual way is to send screenshots of the content of forbidden articles. The host of the readers’ group always reminded the members to take screenshots immediately after they clicked on an article for reading “in case the article will be deleted soon.” In my WeChat Moment, I came across many times that screenshots of deleted articles were reposted. Several respondents used this way too.

There are several variations of such kind. One is sending pictures of texts. Members of readers’ group sent picture of texts quite often. The texts were sometimes quotations from political theorists like Hanna Arendt’s criticism on totalitarianism or sometimes expressions of anger on misconduct of officials in the outbreak. A member once sent a picture of a text of a page from Notebook with words of criticisms. Wai also sent pictures of such kind with criticism to the WeChat chat group I observed. Another variation is to send repost of chat record, a popular use in the outbreak period. I observed such variations in three chat groups I observed and on several respondents’ reposts. The chat records were in the format of public account articles with content of screenshots of individual or chat groups’ chat records. The content of such kind of reposts varied from exposure information about patients’ situation in Wuhan from doctor’s WeChat profiles to ordinary people’s discussions on various restrictions in their residential communities. The third variation is to send screenshots of chat record as pictures. After Dr Li Wenliang’s death, pictures of the chat records in which he sent warning messages about cases of SARS-similar patients in his former classmates’ WeChat chat group was very popular in WeChat Moments and chat groups.

The other usual way is to send links of the deleted articles. The links may lead to an article in a news app, or to other social media platforms, like Weibo or Douban. There were also hyperlinks to texts as well.

The third usual way is to play word games to evade censorship. Using different spellings with the same pronunciation, or different spellings with similar pronunciation are frequently seen in reposts of articles. This has already been picked up by Roberts (2018). Yet, what is added is that I found members in the readers' group and Yu's QQ chat group used the same technique in their instantaneous talks and discussions. Moreover, a member in Yu's chat group broke sensitive phrases like freedom of speech into two messages sent consecutively. Besides, a few members in readers' group and in Yu's group avoided censorship by sending a message and then withdrew it quickly.

A spectacular and phenomenal event was seen on WeChat on 11 March. When a news report from a commercial media's app on a Wuhan doctor who was the first to release the information of coronavirus patients and was named "the one who distributed the whistles" was deleted, more than 30 versions of this news report went viral on WeChat, one after another new versions emerged after the old versions were blocked. Some claimed there were almost a hundred versions. These versions include the same news reports with different titles, different authors, and various languages: from ancient Chinese to foreign languages, from Moors code to QR code. Many people reposted this news report as a relay, including some of my respondents. And some people called it a performance art. This is a wonder in China's Internet history and in the world as well. It was also the climax of cat and mouse game between social media users and censorship.

Using short video clips to evade censorship is another normal use. But in the outbreak, video clips with textual pictures were seen from time to time. There were also short video clips of screenshots of deleted articles. Besides, there were some inventive methods that were not seen before. In the readers' group, members sent videos with clips from mainstream TV news programme but put captions on the picture with messages opposing the top officials shown on the screen.

Political ironies were also common to see in the outbreak and in my respondents social media posts and assemblage interactions. Political irony is argued as practice of self-censorship as well as a kind of political discourse and censorship-evading practice in China (Zhao and Lin, 2020). I argue that censorship-evading practices, as unpacked above in an

empirically nuanced way, were means of grassroots political struggle in the coronavirus outbreak in China. Doing censorship-evading practices was civic virtue in the circumstance of Internet event.

This is the first time that I saw everyone seemed to become activist on WeChat. It is also the first time I saw such a large scale of articles inaccessible. When suddenly everyone spoke about the same thing, though in different voices and stands, I felt the emergence and expressions of “civic” and the practices of citizenship. Besides, when many people insisted on reposting and commenting in spite of the risks of account deletion and even threat of personal danger, and particularly reposting those evaded versions, I felt “political struggle.” In this public health crisis, seeming civic and political activities were widely seen on China’s social media platforms.

“Seeming” because these activities were responses to censorship. In other words, without censorship, many activities were just usual expressing and sharing of content on social media. It is the suppression of expression and sharing that turn intentional expression and sharing into political struggle. Where there is oppression, there is resistance. Censorship, as a mechanism to curb collective actions as King et al. found (2013), became a mechanism to arouse civic consciousness and ignite collective resistance in the coronavirus outbreak. It is also a mechanism to give social interactions meanings of resistance. The social becomes the civic.

9.8 The Blending of the Social and the Civic

The interaction between the social and the civic is a consistent finding of my research. In the circumstance of coronavirus outbreak, new findings are the blending of the social and the civic. The previously social assemblages were observed more civic interactions and the previously political assemblage was observed dynamic social interactions. There was very brief period of neutralization between two types of interactions. The neutralization was detected from the following content that were found in active chat groups that I observed.

Firstly, mix of reposts and exchanges of remarks between members. In the WeChat chat group that Xuan hosted and Wai was a member, it used to be dominantly reposts. During the outbreak, more exchanges of comments, reminders, and remarks showing care and personal feelings were observed side by side with more reposts. The trend was observed in readers group as well, which had been mainly reposts and short exchanges of comments. The

emergence and increase of social interactions between group members gave a “soft” touch of the group atmosphere and showed social support between members. Whereas in Yu’s QQ group and fans chat group, there had been dominantly chats between members. During the outbreak, reposts, screenshots, and other censorship-evading practices were frequently observed.

Secondly, reporting, sharing, and discussing outbreak-related eyewitnesses, hearsays, personal experiences, readings, and news. These practices blurred the boundary between the social and the civic. They were both social and civic. Or, the civic was the social. Meanwhile, accompanying above practices were expression and sharing of personal feelings and mood on outbreak-related events, experience, information, and news including anger, indignation, sadness, depression, and boredom. The social was also the civic in the Internet event.

Thirdly, the combination of the above two practices formed different degree of citizen journalism in chat groups. The most notable was the readers group. The assemblage was suddenly in a boiling state in the evening of 24 January. Before that, the only activities were the consistent posts from the host on the event and other news and brief comments from nine members on the event. The igniter was a repost from an inactive member. The repost was about sending doctors and nurses to Wuhan. The repost was quickly retrieved by the sender. But some members have already known about the news. An active member sent a message saying “I’m now uncertain of the accuracy of the news. Please those friends who have sources verify.” Another member asked him: “You don’t trust the official source?” He said “Not really. All hospitals that were said sending doctors and nurses are military hospitals. The information is not very transparent.” Then the member living near Wuhan sent a screenshot of a WeChat post saying “when a chat group sharing pornographic pictures started talking about the outbreak, I know how serious the situation is.” He then said “I’m near Wuhan. We’re blocked from news and information. We don’t know the exact number of people being infected. We just know that many died.”

It was from here that members showed some very different behaviour from their usual activities in the assemblage. Some of them said about their locations. Some of them said what their professions. Among them was a military man, a very active member. He was teased by another active member saying “You are on standby to be sent to Wuhan. You still join discussions here!” The discussions had a chatting atmosphere since then.

Some member talked about her colleagues being chosen to Wuhan. "I can't say what expressions are there on their faces." There are members blessing for her colleagues. There were members calculating the figures of being infected by piecing up all sources. There were suggestions on what measures could be taken to accommodate doctors and nurses being sent to assist. Some members reported that there were infected cases in several villages near his. The member in Wuhan became a news centre and posted Wuhan lockdown information such as "Troops are seen in Wuhan now." He was teased by several active members as "on the spot special correspondent."

On 25 January, 25 members joined the discussion. It was not like the usual short exchanges of words of the assemblage but dynamic discussions for hours. Since this day, more inactive members sent posts and reposts and some joined discussions. There were more messages from one member at different time, showing that they were joining discussions rather than clicking on the assemblage, sending a message or a repost and then leaving. They read what the others had sent and they responded. There were also more rounds of talks. There would always be someone to pick up the topic and push the talk to move on.

Some members shared their own life in isolation. Some reported about their surroundings and neighbourhood. Some talked about their fears. Some shared self-protection and prevention measures. Some posted the screenshots of their other WeChat chat groups content to show the concerns and worries about the influence of the outbreak. Some sent reminders about the most infectious places in household life. Some reposted article on how doctors and nurses could protect themselves and said "I don't know how to let the doctors and nurses in Wuhan know these. Please send this article to as many chat groups as you can." A member complained about her family as "not willing to listen to me and indulged in a beautiful world." And an inactive-turned-active member showed his breakdown. He sent a post with a lot of exclamation marks saying that the host's posts were full of negative energy. He couldn't stand anymore and withdrew the assemblage.

This was very different from the atmosphere of this assemblage since my observation. The exchanges of words and short discussions before the outbreak had been very like civic talks between citizens unknown of each other. They had expressed their opinions, perspectives, standpoints, discontent, but they had not talked about themselves. They had been emotional sometimes at social injustices, abuses of power and unawaken

people. But they had not been sympathetic to each other. They had asked in the assemblage “What’s your opinion on this report?” but they had not asked “What’s the situation in your area?” They had never sent audio messages to the group saying that “Currently my family of seven are all fine. No one has got a fever. No one has a cough. Everyone is fine. I stopped my dad from driving his car. So we all stay at home.” They had sought after supporters of their opinions but they had not sought after supporters to cling together. They had sent reposts of various negative and critical reporting but they had not report situations of their surrounding areas and themselves. They appeared to be closer to each other and to trust each other more.

This is the first time in my observation to see so many user-generated contents in the group. It used to be a reposting group. The host may send authentic posts produced by his team, members usually sent reposts of all kind. In the outbreak period, some members sent messages and videos about what they witnessed, experienced, and overheard.

Another peak dynamic moment in the assemblage was on 6 February. The member near Wuhan posted a screenshot of Weibo. On it the account posted “Dr Li Wenliang was not saved and passed away.” Dozens of members sent their condolence and the indignation piled up with condoling poems, pictures, writings, and affective comments. When a member posted a quote from the constitution saying “Article 35 of the PRC Constitution: Citizens of the People’s Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration”, the host sent a statement. It said “Another chat group was blocked. Forbidden topics are not allowed in the group. Not allowed until June. We see many people being warned recently. We can’t bear the loss. Those who discuss please leave the group. If you don’t want to put me in danger, please watch what you say.” This statement silenced discussions and members only sent posts for several days. The assemblage went back to its normal pattern and atmosphere.

The days between 25 January and 7 February was like a window period to see latent connectivity and connections between members in the assemblage. Before this, they were in the same assemblage out of the same “interest” in knowing subversive and alternative content that the host claimed to offer. Members may have their own specific purposes and specific topics of interest but they behaved like they were present in the assemblage to get information, opinions, knowledge, exchanges of thoughts and ideas, truth, facts, and may be resonance, at leisure time. During the outbreak, they still

sought these but seeking these became their “main business,” not just an occasional or even accidental moment in a day. They took the assemblage as an important source of information. Some members urged the “special correspondent” to send more information and some asked “Is there any news about Wuhan?” Moreover, they took this group as a place to exchange information. They gave what they had to the assemblage in return. These efforts turned the assemblage into an information hub. Yet, it was not just that each sent what they had. There was always someone asking “Is this true?” by reposting a news or a picture or a video and someone else gave verifications. It is like a newsroom without editor-in-chief and without clear division of labours. Those who were active took their roles naturally. This kind of cooperation has been seen a couple of times before the coronavirus outbreak. It was just more frequent and seamless in the outbreak period. There were two young men in the assemblage who were good at using VPNs. Both used to play the verifier’s role. And throughout the outbreak, more members played such roles. They also tried to work together to work out the numbers of doctors and nurses sent to Wuhan and the numbers of the infected correspondingly. They verified some figures from party media’s authoritative release by piecing different sources of information. They took this very seriously as efforts to find out fact and truth. Besides, they also took this assemblage as a place to socialize. This was not seen before the outbreak. In the past, there were very few social interactions. There were a few season’s greetings, small jokes and humours at exchanges of words or comments and mentioning of their own information. In this window period, there were much more jokes, teasing, greetings, cares, and good will. Past talks were very much like those between citizens and now the talks were very much like chats between friends.

The assemblage was the same critical as it used to be. They ridiculed the central government. They sent sarcastic messages and political ironies. They criticized the local government. They loathed profiteers. They ridiculed the party media’s propaganda reporting. And they challenged the policy-makers’ policies. They exposed uncivil behaviours of some people and the abuse of power and misconduct of those organizations and individuals taking charge of donation, charity and community lockdown. The difference, as compared with their past criticisms, was that there were seen more consensus on these criticisms. At least there were no remarks of different ideas and thoughts as seen in the past. They seemed to be unanimous.

The changing pattern and dynamic of the assemblage interaction echo some findings with individual participants. The outbreak put people on act to know, to make sense what was going on, to voice their concerns, and/or to show their cares. Online assemblages were major ways for such acts. The readers group was a better location than individual profiles to see how individuals shared, interacted, and cooperated to make collaborative efforts to know and make sense, to voice concerns and show good will. They worked together to piece a reality, from each one's contribution by participation. This reality was not solely from mainstream media, nor social media, nor their own witnesses and experiences. The reality was a combination of the three. For those who had to stay at home in the lockdown and had many chat groups and different social media platform accounts, the social media took a very large proportion of the reality. They collaborated not only by each contributing her share but also by sharing common understanding of euphemisms. No one asked what the intentionally-made "wrong spellings" mean. They all knew what they referred to. In a certain sense, the assemblage was a temporary small commonality. The members were connected by the common threat of the outbreak, fear of it, hunger to know real situation about it, wills to scrutinize those who worked out and conducted measures, discontent with certain measures and phenomena and their collaborated acts.

The changes also show that in specific circumstances like a public health crisis, the functions of an online assemblage may take slight changes. The assemblage used to be a pure "information and perspective" one. That is, members came to seek forbidden information and perspectives. But in the outbreak, it also became a place for some members to seek support, to send good will, and to express unanimity. It changed from a pure civic space into a blend of civic space and social space.

The temporary blending and the social interaction of civic content, though at a brief time, was observed in other two chat groups too, though in a reverse way. In Yu's QQ group, which was a daily chat group, member chatted on various daily trivial for socializing. The changes observed in the outbreak period were not changes of dynamics or patterns, but changes of chat topics. Members chatted a lot more of the latest news, Weibo hot searches, news app top stories, updates of media organizations' Weibo and WeChat accounts, updates of local government certain departments' Weibo and WeChat accounts, and foreign media reporting. Meanwhile, they still chatted about their daily trivial but those daily trivial were mostly related to the

outbreak. What the group interactions revealed was not only that members became more news and current affairs sensitive, but also that the public event became their lives. The social was blended with the civic with following configurations.

Firstly, the majority of news mentioned in the assemblage was online social news or Weibo hot searches. Secondly, members brought news as topics of conversation either for concern of the public or for concern of self or assemblage members. Thirdly, members often made comments or remarks with strong personal emotions or bias. Fourthly, members chatted news in the routine context. That is, they may bring topics on social news or issues after a chat on movie and then the topics moved on to food after social news or issues. There was no transition in between. As long as a new message was in, the chat would pick up the topic in the new message and divert from the previous topic.

Since 21 January, outbreak became the major topics in the assemblage. News became the main “triggers” of topics and many times with the news came the sender’s message like “The pals in those places in serious conditions take care.” Or “News said the public transportation in Jinan was halted. How about your places pals?” Members also sent pictures and messages about the situations in their areas but with a very different atmosphere as that observed in the readers’ group. When a member said “The situation in my place is very serious. All places of business must have temperature check. Every junction on the road has sentry post. I need to have temperature check for going to my residence community.” Some members asked him not to be scared. “Wear face mask, don’t go to place of crowd.” Some said “Strategically look down upon it. Tactically take it seriously.” When members shared the statistics of the infected they got from each sources and were horrified by the growth rate, a members said “It seems that there were someone cured. There could be research on their immune cells.” Like usual, whatever negative mood or emotions were shared in the assemblage, there would be someone to comfort, care, support, cheer up, or distract.

Critical voices were common when they chatted the news, but they were not seriously critical. Like negative mood, criticisms and indignations were distracted or even joked. When members talked about various negative news like Red Cross donation scandals, online videos of carrying dead bodies, and breaking into household to check resident’s temperature, the member in Wuhan said “I’m scared to death by you.” And a member joked

“Your city has a great Health Committee, we such a megacity is scared by them from so far away.”

The only time that there was no one to distract the topic was the day of Dr Li Wenliang’s death. Some members spoke out their condolence, anger, indignation and sadness instead of using devices like poems, writings, screenshots, and reposts. For the first time in the observation period, Yu explicated his political activism and mobilizations in this assemblage. This is the first time that he trespassed the two spaces of his own: his activism on Weibo and his socializing in this chat group. It was also a blend of his two “selves” or “identities”: online activist and an ordinary social media user. When an inactive member sent a message saying “You’re chatting about these. Aren’t you afraid that the group is blocked?” Yu replied “For this, let it be blocked.” Yet, after 7 February, the chats went back to its normal pattern. The chats were once again like streams of consciousness of daily trivial.

At lesser degree, the other two active chat groups were also observed blending of the social and the civic in group interactions. Each chat group had its own unique and nuanced features of blending the two. What was common to both was that some social acts in online assemblage interactions became circumstantial civic virtues. Sharing eyewitnesses and personal experience, voicing personal indignation and sadness, participating in collective expressions of personal feelings became such kind of civic virtues in the early stage of coronavirus outbreak, when truths were concealed and efforts of revelation of truths were suppressed. Furthermore, many members in the online assemblages I observed, like some of my respondents, showed civic conscience, sense of justice, willingness to seek truth, and civic awareness which were previously observed in activist respondents. These circumstantial civic acts and virtues may be transient, improvising, random, and inconsistent, their temporality contributed to the Internet event. The fluidity of civic virtue, or the circumstantial rise and fall of particular acts to be considered civic, is common to see in online assemblages. Since each online assemblage is as individualistic as every individual person, the concept of civic virtue meets more challenges in examining individual user’s practices in individual online assemblage. Moreover, as social media users usually have more than one online assemblage and they may behave both consistently and circumstantially, the concept of civic virtue sees more conflicts as a useful tool to look at individuals in assemblages.

9.9 Theorizing

On political communication on social media, Yu emphasizes situational, or even circumstantial political expressions that are not always political motivated, but emerge “when opportunities arise” (2016: 414). Breaking events like the outbreak of coronavirus in China were configurations of such opportunities. It is also an opportunity to unpack how the civic arises from the social and how the social and the civic blend in practices: in the sudden burst of outbreak when the truth was concealed and suppressed by the government, individuals went to each other in collectives to support each other and to do puzzles of the truth. “Social” here is felt as the need and even urge to communicate, collaborate, and be together with others to make sense of what’s going on and to express the personal for seeking resonance. The civic is citizenship practiced collectively and politically via the practice of civic virtues including consistent civic virtues seen from activist-respondents and circumstantial civic virtues seen from previously non-activist respondents. The civic here is together with others to find out truth/reality despite suppression of truth-seeking and collective actions. The government’s conceal of truth and suppression on truth seeking and spreading made collective talks on truth political expressions and political struggle.

The practice of citizenship in Internet event is both self-breakthrough and ordinary. Self-breakthrough refers to the findings that some respondents broke their routine practices in online assemblages and showed circumstantial civic virtues. Ordinariness, instead of being argued as showing legal structure and social norms in citizenship in daily life (Staeheli et al, 2012), means their civic acts and political expressions were reporting and collectively sharing and discussing everyday life experiences in special circumstance. Massive reporting, sharing, and discussing everyday life experience connected social media users and formed collective expressions as Internet event. The social blended with the civic.

Internet event like coronavirus outbreak explicated some latent connections. One is the connection between consistent civic virtues and circumstantial or even situational civic virtues. I argue that most social media assemblage users have both civic virtues in different ratios. The working of one or both is idiosyncratic and contingent on social interactions in social media assemblages as well as social context, for example, with or without breaking event. Furthermore, as most people join in more than one social media assemblages, they demonstrate different ratios of both civic virtues in

different assemblages. Civic virtue is not just a personal trait which triggers same performance by the same stimulus. The practice of civic virtue is fluid, complicated, and contingent in social interactions in multiple social media assemblages.

Secondly, the connections between online activist and non-activist. Activists with more consistent civic virtues in consistent-circumstantial ratio of civic virtue were like starters and via social interactions in online assemblages they encountered and interacted with non-activists, whose circumstantial civic virtues were ignited and became followers in mobilizations. My findings show this civic virtue version of the starter-follower model of leaderless online collective action (Margetts et al, 2015). The coronavirus outbreak Internet event, like connective actions suggested by Bennett and Segerberg, (2012), was no chief planner, producer, coordinator, organizer, advertiser, and mobilizer. It was self-emerging, non-organized, grassroots, autonomous, voluntary, spontaneous, participatory, and temporary. Many ordinary social media users were participants, audience, and spectators all at the same time. I argue that circumstantial civic virtues found in non-activists played a vital role in swelling of such leaderless online collective action like coronavirus outbreak.

Thirdly, connection between close-circle social network and non-subjective social network. Mobility of social media users and their transport of content between different assemblages and platforms ignite such connection. Because of multiple assemblage participation, close-circle and non-subjective networks are always connected by the user and their transport of content was always found in daily uses, but at small scale. The connectedness of the two networks were highlighted by the exponential increase both in volume and dynamic of content transport in the Internet event. The mobilizations of both networks contributed to the largest Internet event in years.

What is also highlighted is the continuity and change between the daily and the breaking of the daily configured as Internet event. The former is the infrastructure of the latter and the latter is the illuminator of the former. The daily is the daily social interactions for most social media users and civic interactions for activists in multiple online assemblages as well as the aforementioned two social networks both constructed by and hosting such interactions. In other words, multiple online assemblage participation is infrastructure of Internet event.

Moreover, observations from the talks and reposts showed that personal safety and public security were in resonance, so were personal interest and common interest. Self-interest and common good were highly identical in the early stage of coronavirus outbreak, when many aspects of the outbreak were unknown. The overlapping between self-interest and common good became a mobilization force to activate many people to join online expression and discussion. This may partly explain the unusual dynamics of online assemblages in the outbreak as compared with other Internet events.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

This project explores the interactions of the social and the civic in everyday life on China's social media via unpacking the routes of nexus of practices linking the social to the civic and vice versa in participation in online assemblages. In such process, I unfold how individuals' social demand, civic virtue, and civic engagement are articulated via daily practices of online assemblage participation. I argue that the prevalence of social media and grouping function with it highlights the role of social-entangled and technology-assisted civic virtue in practicing such function in online assemblages and I argue that online assemblage practices structure users' various social relations in collectives, via which everyday social interactions put users into practices of civic virtues and produce concomitant relationship between the social and the civic. I argue that this new reality represents new means of interaction between the individual and the collective, complicates the fluidity between the social and the civic, opens new spaces for civic acts, adds dimensions to the conceptualization of the civic, and configures technology-assisted civic practices. The civic significance of these interactions, articulations and concomitant relationship and the implications of such findings on concepts like the social, the civic, public, and the entanglement between them, are argued in the theorization section in the end of each empirical chapter. In this concluding chapter, I return to the key questions asked in the Introduction chapter, connect all those theorizations, and reflect on how my research findings inform major theories that this project leans on: civic virtue, citizenship, and civil society in China, which not only provide important normative support to media as practice theory, but also interact with online assemblage participation practices. Limitations of this research will be addressed in the end too.

10.2 Social Media and Civic Virtue

Any normative argument concerning civic virtue, citizenship and civil society involves values, philosophies and ideologies. One of the dominant contemporary value, philosophy and ideology is democracy, or in Sen's words, one of the great development of the 20th century is "[t]he idea of democracy as a universal commitment" (1999: 4). Though democracy is a contested theory, what is consensual is the vital importance attached to

people as the starting point and endorsement of value, philosophy and ideology rhetoric. People is the firm ground of normative stand. Coincidentally, media as practice theoretical framework introduced in Chapter 3 also sets my research on people: what they do on and with social media and what they say about what they do. This link, I argue, builds a common ground between normative stand and practice theory on which the two interact. I argue practice perspective introduces an entry for normative stand to empirical world and the two become each other's reference. I argue the conceptualizations of normative concepts need to take empirical practices as reference to adapt to epochal development.

With the above "value" in mind, the civic virtues I argue to unpack from my respondents, listed in empirical chapters, can be roughly classified into two categories: firstly, those good for one to be a social being with an inclination to others, for example, reciprocity, cooperation, sharing, warm-heartedness, altruism, etc. These virtues help a person form orientation and reliance on grouping and collective forming as means of coping with personal needs and wants including pragmatic and psychological ones. They also help people mutually help and support and increase the social capital of a society. I call this set inter-citizen civic virtues. The other set, including some of above, are those good for one to be a civic person with an inclination to common good like sense of justice, responsibility, collectivity, dedication, commitment, etc. They make one more oriented to social issues and concerns other than immediate individual needs and wants only. These virtues help a person participate in collective expressive actions to form public opinion or voices, joint forces and influences. I call this set of civic virtues citizen-state ones and they are more often recommended by political theories on citizenship and democracy, to be discussed next.

Inter-citizen civic virtues and citizen-state civic virtues are not neatly separated and both are important. And they are answers to the question I raise in the Introduction chapter: Does participation in multiple online assemblages cultivate civic virtues in China and how? According to my research, online assemblages highlight the importance of civic virtue in their formations and maintenance and reveal the relationship between the two kinds of civic virtue. I argue that inter-citizen civic virtue highlights the social attributes of the civic in social media age and citizen-state civic virtue sometimes rises from practices of inter-citizen civic virtue. Inter-citizen civic virtue lubricates the existence and maintenance of online assemblages which are breeding, training, and practicing ground for both kinds of civic

virtues, but not evenly working on them and on every individual user. Though there are various political and commercial influences on social media as discussed in the Introduction chapter, most online assemblages are mainly grassroots aggregates of ordinary social media users. Such aggregates are mostly formed and maintained freely, voluntarily, and naturally via daily interactions between members or contributions from them. Such everyday interactions and contributions are cultivations and practices of inter-citizen civic virtues, and citizen-state civic virtues to a less degree, idiosyncratically. As seen in my findings, my respondents practiced the former more frequently and consistently than the latter. What is more, the two kinds of civic virtues are interconnected in many circumstances. Everyday assemblage interactions, especially in close-circle social networks addressed in Chapter 7, increase chances of broadening horizon, accessing diverse information, encountering various news and social issues, hearing plural voices, witnessing social media movements, and participating collective actions at various levels: reading/known, liking, commenting, sharing, and criticizing or expressing. The interconnections of these two kinds of civic virtues are particularly important in times of tightening censorship and oppression of political talk addressed in Chapter 9. Inter-citizen civic virtue practices are always breeding grounds for citizen-state civic virtues and the former will rouse the latter, as seen in cases of Internet event explored in Chapter 9. As long as social interactions in online assemblages are active and dynamic, the seeds for citizen-state civic virtues will always be brewed and potentials for civic and political participation and influence are brewed as well.

As discussed in the Introduction chapter, there are mainly two types of literature on civic virtue: one argues the importance of civic virtue for civic engagement, political participation, and democracy; the other offers proposals on concrete civic virtues that are desired for the above projects. My research adds a perspective by using media as practice theory to explore what and how civic virtues are practiced in online assemblages, and what these practices suggest for conceptualizing civic virtue in social media age. I argue that the empirical perspective of media as practice theory adds some new dimensions to the normative concept of civic virtue. Firstly, stratifying the “common good” (Dagger, 1997; Warren, 2001) conceptualization of civic virtue. Online assemblage practices demonstrate the layered ranges of the “common” in “common good” since every online assemblage as collective efforts is a commonality. My findings that my participants participated in multiple online assemblages further fragment

“common good” as an integrated whole conceptualization of civic virtue. Civic virtue can be a universal level ideal but civic virtues are locally, circumstantially and often socially practiced.

This leads to the second dimension my empirical research adds to the normative concept of civic virtue: the practices of civic virtue explicate the importance of factors like circumstances, settings, and whom that one is with in collectives. That is to say, civic virtue is not practiced mechanically in response to role performance (the role as citizen) but constructively in social relations and social and civic interactions. My findings show if one practices civic virtue and what civic virtues one practices are related to whom she is with and which online assemblage she is in.

Thirdly, social media technological affordances are components of many civic virtue practices in online assemblages. Such technological affordances not only provide infrastructure so that online social and civic practices are possible, but also join the practices in generating collective virtue, or aggregating piecemeal individual self-regard acts into collective acts with civic outcome and influence. Besides, some technological affordances contribute to channelling the social and the civic online, for example, reposting as seen in Chapter 7. In the face of technology-assisted civic virtue, some argue that social media platforms propose a certain version of “the social” which is pretty thin and determined by commercial logics (Couldry and Dijck, 2015). My findings are that each social media platform may have its own version of the social as competitive edge, but users’ cross-platforms online assemblage participation minimizes the framing effect of each version. As seen from the movement or shuttle of some of my respondents from large and open assemblage on open platform to smaller and closed assemblages on WeChat, users take advantage of platform technological features for their purposes.

Fourthly, civic virtues are practiced flexibly and idiosyncratically embedded in various settings on social media assemblages. Everyday social interactions in various online assemblages produce situations that increase chances for various practices of civic virtues, from circumstantial and incidental practices to consistent ones. The flexibility of civic virtue practices refers not only to if, what, and how civic virtues are practiced in multiple online assemblage participation, but also to a range of civic virtues from inter-citizen ones to citizen-state ones. This range of civic virtues are configured in hierarchy in everyday practices. That is, the inter-citizen civic virtues are more widely and frequently practiced by larger number of social

media users in more variety of social interactions in online assemblages; whereas citizen-state civic virtues are less widely and frequently practiced in everyday online assemblage participation, unless in Internet events, and are mostly by veteran and amateur activists.

Fifthly, civic virtue practices in online assemblages have limitations. Many practices of civic virtue originate from personal needs: practical ones and psychological ones. In many cases, one has to demonstrate civic virtue in collectives to satisfy one's own needs. And people join most online assemblages primarily for social purposes. For example, my respondents were not keen on networking with strangers, like NGOs and commercial organizations do, and they usually did not have intention to associate with fellow members so as to mobilize collectives for common goals, ends, and influence. Participation in online assemblages was more means to achieve self-regard interest or demand via collective strength than means to form collective strength for a cause or end. Such social need-originated civic virtue practices result in scalable, inconsistent, and volatile practices of civic virtues, particularly the citizen-state ones, which are more important in rousing civic and political influences. Moreover, online civic practices tend to be consensual. Differences either lead to silence, or uncivil and emotional personal attack, as I observed occasionally in the sites, and/or the same-minded set up smaller and closed assemblages on WeChat and QQ. As I argue in Chapter 5, online assemblages were found to form on seeking commonalities. This may lead to lack of data on differences, conflicts, and inequality between assemblage members.

My empirical findings from media as practice perspective bring a dynamic perspective to the static "image" of civic virtue proposed as disposition, personal traits, and qualities etc. My findings are that practices of civic virtues are social, circumstantial, relative, and contextual, as reflected from participation in different online assemblages. Civic virtue is not like a default setup in a person's mind and character but is practiced as acts reactive and responsive to settings, conditions, norms, atmosphere, social relations and social rules, which are explicated in social and civic interactions in online assemblages. This is not to say that there are no consistent civic virtues. Consistent civic virtues were seen in different occasions with similar contexts and in similar social relations.

10.3 Social Media and Citizenship

As discussed in the Introduction chapter, scholarship on social media and civic and political participation pre-assumes users' identity/role as citizens and see if social media technological affordances change, facilitate, or even generate new forms of participation (Papacharissi, 2010; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; 2013; Highfield, 2016, to name a few). From my findings, I find this pre-assumption problematic. Returning to the question asked in the Introduction chapter: What citizenship should be pre-assumed? Those argued in Western democracies? Or the one propagated by the Chinese government which puts loving the Communist Party and respecting its reign superior to anything else? Without values and normative standpoints attached to the understanding of citizenship, citizen is simply a legal status which may easily become a prey for propaganda and reign. As argued above, practice-centred perspective attaches importance to people and their practices as the reference for value judgement and normative standpoint. Therefore, I argue that practice perspective adds one dimension to citizenship: that is, people practice civic virtue to be citizens. This argument is not comprehensive enough to cover the vastness, diversity, and plurality of civic virtue practices but it reflects a theoretical attempt to interpret grassroots civic practices in China's online.

Besides, literature on citizenship usually looks at citizenship in its narrow sense as to govern the individual-state relationship. For example, Dahlgren and many other political theorists' conceptualization of citizenship are anchored on citizen's involvement in democracy as political institution (Dahlgren, 2000; 2003; 2006; Putnam, 2000; Zúñica et al, 2012; Zúñica et al, 2017). This is very important aspect of citizenship in terms of citizen-state relationship. This relationship creates a common status or identity which connects every qualified person, or individual, in a country into a collectivity of citizens. Therefore, citizenship also governs inter-citizen relationships, though this connotation is less highlighted. Yet, these commonality, connection, and collectivity are arbitrary, abstract, formal, nominal, and lacking substance if they are just imagined and written by law. My findings show that communications between citizens via practices of civic virtues explicate such commonality, connection and collectivity, though at various scale. Legacy media have been argued to shoulder the mission to serve as media of communication between citizens and between citizen and state. My findings add that social media online assemblages provide additional new opportunities, spaces, and means for inter-citizen contacts and interactions,

which create context and enhance potentialities for generating individual-state relationship, usually via collective actions. Yet, opportunities, spaces and means are only part of the story. As compared with legacy media, social media provides direct contact and communication between citizens and these contact and communication are practicing citizenship. My findings show some features of these online citizenship practices in online assemblages which answer the question raised in the Introduction chapter: how ordinary social media users practice citizenship in the online.

Firstly, parallel of self-regard interest and civic virtues. Self-regard and civic virtue are considered by most Republican theorists as dichotomies but Duncan sees them as symbiotic in his debate with Burt (Duncan and Burt, 1995:147). Aristotle believed so, Duncan argues, because Aristotle thought that there is a social context of self and a public side in self, forming a multidimensional self, rather than a unidimensional self who concerns only with its private side (Duncan and Burt, 1995:148). My findings support the multidimensional self argument since participation in multiple online assemblages made up of different social relations or networks, sometimes on different social media platforms as well, reflects very different “performance” of self in different roles and settings. Yet, I do not argue for unity of self-regard and civic virtue in multidimensional self. Instead, I argue self-regard interest is usually primary motivation to participate in multiple online assemblages and interactions in those assemblages cultivate civic virtues practices during reactive and responsive acts. Citizenship is performed and done in such civic virtue practices. Moreover, online assemblages are melting pot for every individual member’s self-regard. Interactions between members or contributions from members combine self-regard and other-regard. Other-regard is an entry into citizenship. Dagger points out that civic virtue demands people to look outward and to promote the common good (1997: 13). My findings show that online assemblages participation reveals citizens’ efforts to look outward to seek commonality instead of common good.

Secondly, citizenship is practiced at inter-citizen level and citizen-state level in online assemblages. Assemblage interactions and contributions, particularly those on private content, are possible out of reciprocity, cooperation, help and support. These civic virtues are practiced as inter-citizen citizenship. This level of citizenship is widely and consistently seen in daily social interactions of online assemblages of most kinds. Citizen-state level of citizenship is seen both in everyday interactions of political-themed

assemblages and in other kinds of online assemblages when news and social issues are either incidentally encountered or intentionally discussed or shared. When Internet events occur, this level of citizenship is more widely seen.

Thirdly, citizenship is practiced in a complicated idiosyncratic way. That is, in online assemblages, citizenship is always performed in responses/reactions to personal experience and to “content” of interactions or contributions from other members, there are random factors in influencing if and how citizenship is performed. This kind of performance is fluid and fluctuating.

Fourthly, citizenship in online assemblages is often performed unintentionally and unconsciously. For most ordinary social media users, online assemblages are places to satisfy various personal interests and needs via social and collective ways. External observers like researchers judge various socializing activities as civic or with civic significance. Users are judged as doing citizenship in those activities. Very few of them show apparent intention and awareness to perform citizenship. In online assemblages, citizenship is not fulfilled as duty, but people practice civic virtues to become citizens.

In summary, citizenship as practices of civic virtue is imperfect. Both citizenship and civic virtue are idealistic and normative concepts. Whereas examinations of online assemblage participation reveal such imperfection. Citizenship in online assemblages is often performed by integrating one’s practical need into collective effort. In another word, citizenship is performed by tapping corresponding civic virtues in the “right” online assemblages. Besides, because people practice different civic virtues in different online assemblages, citizenship is not as wholesale as “the Citizen” but is composed of multiple dimensions networked by shuttling between different assemblages. Moreover, the multiple dimensions of citizenship performance are usually in various conflict and inconsistency, as seen, for example, in circumstantial civic virtues. Such arguments direct academic focus from what citizenship should be to how citizenship is practiced.

Conceptualizing doing citizenship as practicing civic virtue is an attempt to theorize grassroots civic practices in authoritarian China where an obvious disjoint exists between officially and ideologically defined and propagated citizenship, via school education and government’s mouthpiece mass media, and people’s everyday practices in online assemblages. This disjoint is revealed in the argument of two public opinions: one in the mouthpiece mass media and one in the word of mouth of people (Nan, 2003). In the

prevalence of online assemblage environment, the word of mouth of people moves partly from various scenes and settings in life into the online, is datafied, scatters in daily and mostly social interactions in online assemblages, transports between different online assemblages and even different social media platforms, is captured and aggregated by big data, and is networked in certain circumstances, seemingly forming “unified” voices and influences. The argument of online public opinion echoes the last situation (Nip and Fu, 2016b). In comparison with real life scenes and settings in which word of mouth occurs, I found that my participants conversed with much more fellow members in much more diverse social relations and in more means in online assemblages, though in more piecemeal ways.

Citizenship practiced via civic virtues in everyday participation in online assemblages is often circumstantial, transient, inconsistent, fragmented, and not active, but voluntarily and spontaneously. To sum up, this dimension of citizenship is mostly practiced in social scenes and settings. These are features of grassroots citizenship which forms the mass base of online civil society, therefore returning to the question asked in the Introduction chapter: if and how ordinary social media users in China form the argued online civil society and public sphere.

10.4 Social Media and Civil Society

Prevalence of multiple participation in online assemblages relates to the argument of co-evolution of Internet and civil society or the facilitating role played by social media in China’s civil society (Yang, 2003a; 2003b; 2014; Zhang and Zheng eds., 2009; Mou, et al. 2013; deLisle et al. eds, 2016; Tu, 2016; Xie et al, 2017). These civil society literature shares two common proposals: Internet and social media provide new means of association for citizens; and of collective influence on government, either playing supervisory role on government (Yang, 2003a) or facilitating collective actions like protest (Tu, 2016; Brunner, 2017). My research adds new findings to both proposals.

In terms of association, returning to the question “what is the effect of associated life on individuals citizenship?” raised in the Introduction chapter, if association means voluntary and consistent get-together of people, then I find that social media not only provides new means of informal associating in addition to offline one, online assemblages also provide new forms of informal associating. In spite of location, time, face-to-face, goal, and

activity-bound as seen in offline informal associating, online assemblages ask no such bindings. Informal associating in online assemblages is flexible in terms of co-presence, regularity, consistency, activeness, fixed membership, online-offline combination, organization, and attachment but is restricted to discursive interaction/contribution as the only form of activity. Furthermore, informal associating in online assemblages is fluid. On the one hand, I found my participants switch from one online assemblage to another in one time; on the other hand, they often keep participating in new online assemblages with the move on of their life stage and development of new interest. Informal online association is often made up of nomadic individuals. Besides, the findings that participation in online assemblages is considered pastime or leisure activities, despite embeddedness of social media in daily routine and participation in multiple online assemblages, add to the flexibility and fluidity of informal associating in online assemblages. Informal associating stresses being together with someone instead of with specific people and organizations except close-circle social networks like colleagues and alumni.

Informal associating in online assemblages is loose, unbinding, unorganized, and set in daily life. It is like collective of networked individuals. Yet, when opportunities come and in certain circumstances, informal associating brings collective actions, force, and even influence. Therefore, informal associating is event and issue organized instead of formality organized. Such organization is usually temporary. Long-term organization, as said earlier, is real-life social relations brought into online assemblages.

Informal associating in online assemblages brings more complexity to hierarchical structure of China's civil society, in addition to the online presence of civil organizations like NGOs, which is the core, and to the online presence of various less formal offline associations between citizens, for example, neighbourhood communities (Heberer, 2009) and volunteer groups like the old building protection group that two of my respondents host. There are organization-sponsored and supported online assemblages; volunteer groups hosted online assemblages; online political topic forums and chat groups; elite-centred issue groups on Weibo (Wang and Shi, 2018); professional and amateur activists hosted online assemblages; and ordinary citizens online assemblages. Various online assemblages become social basis of civil society in China.

Social media as the latest development of Internet technologies has embedded and embodied in Chinese people's everyday life. Social media

platforms have made up an ecology of online socializing and associating which accommodates many aspects of people's social and civic life. In such ecology, the largest social media platform in China, real-life social network-based WeChat, as discussed in Chapter 5 and 7, is the backbone of such ecology as it attracts people of all age, social strata, and regions into a network of networked ego-centred social networks. In addition, more and more people move and set up strangers assemblages on WeChat, and mix real-life social network with strangers into assemblages as well. WeChat becomes a huge network of content generating, publishing, and flowing along the mix of real-life social networks and strangers assemblages. Meanwhile, WeChat is technically linked to other major social media platforms in China like Weibo, Douban, and Zhihu, which are less popular and more elite used platforms. The technical link is utilized by some young social media users and content is transported from more elite platforms and disseminated to popular WeChat, especially in eventful circumstances. To sum up, social media in China build an integrated technological/social network infrastructure which becomes channels of socializing, informal associating, content generation and dissemination, information flow, and mobilizing. I argue this network infrastructure is an indispensable force when conceptualizing civil society in China today.

Online assemblage becomes one of the basic units in such network infrastructure of people. And online assemblage participation activates social media users to practice civic virtues and subsequently citizenship, mainly at inter-citizen level. I argue that civic virtue plays a fundamental role in this network infrastructure. With the prevalence of social media among all age groups, in all social strata, and in all regions in China, the scale of civic virtue practices is large. Such bottom-up practices are indispensable as new forms of civic engagement in China today and are foundations of civil society in China.

In authoritarian China where formal association is government controlled and censored, informal associating in online assemblages is especially significant as means of forming collective actions, forces, and influences, which activate society's power on the state. Online collective actions have become a major means of formation of public opinion and online sentiment, both are under tight surveillance and censorship. Chinese government on the one hand tries to curb such formations and on the other hand takes measures to respond to online public opinion and sentiment. This has become a special political phenomenon in China and participation in online

assemblage has, in some occasions, become a means and form for political participation too.

China's online society is embedded in daily life, based on the infrastructure of online assemblages made up of nomadic individuals with civic virtue as brick and mortar of this infrastructure. People's everyday participation in multiple online assemblages produces their lubricant switch between different roles including the role as citizens and lubricant movement between social, civic, and political participation. The large scale of populace in online assemblages might be kind of "democratic" participation in China, democratic in the sense of grassroots, bottom-up, voluntary, free, plural (in voices) and diverse (in concerns) communications between citizens.

10.5 Limitations of the Research

My research is an initial attempt to explore the complexity and vastness of online collectives across multi social media platforms in everyday uses, unfold the links between everyday participation in online collectives and civic practices, unpack in depth the dynamic interactions between the social and the civic in the online, and apply the concept of civic virtue to the examination of social media and civic participation. Though this research makes contributions to and bridges some gaps in the understanding of social media and civic practices in China, ethnographic researching on social media, and application of media as practice theory, it has obvious limitations too.

Firstly, methodological limitations. My sample is not big, though respondents led me into multiple online assemblages in multiple social media platforms where I observed much more social media users. My sample is not representative either, though I tried to recruit as diverse respondents as I could. Open and public social media platforms in China, where I recruited most of my respondents, tend to have younger and more urban users and have much less users than the so-called personal platforms like WeChat and QQ. Ethical concerns stopped me from recruiting on the biggest platforms WeChat and QQ. The method of informal online interviews cannot be free from respondent-centred perspective. That is, respondents said what they wanted to say and they talked about their assemblage practices from their own stands and perspectives. Though such limitations are made up a bit by balance from online observations, the subjectiveness of interview data is unavoidable. As for online observation without participation, the biggest limitation is that I could not observe all online assemblages in which my

respondents participated both owing to ethical concerns and technical impossibilities. My research scratches only a tiny portion of the creativity and diversity of online assemblage practices in China. Furthermore, my use of WeChat and QQ as the main tools for online interview framed my observation sites and data generation as well.

Secondly, limitation in the application of media as practice theory. Media as practice theory provides empirical stand and practical guidance for almost every step of this research. However, except highlighting to look at practice as the perspective of research and to find out what people do and say, media as practice theory provides no other theoretical support. Different from some arguments on practice theory that practices can be analysed by being decomposed into elements (Shove et al, 2012) or theorizing practices as composed of acts and teleoaffectivity which link body and mind and action (Schatzki, 1996), media as practice is not simply “acts” of using media but meaning of media uses in daily life. Besides, for social media, media as practice is not just acts of people on social media but what content those acts produce. The biggest difference between media as practice and other practices is the meaning of “content” involved in media as practice.

Future research could further explore the dynamics and pluralities of online assemblages as spaces of difference and even conflict of voices and interests, and of power and inequality. Commercial influence on civic engagement in the online deserves more research as well. The importance of this aspect is felt in the findings of reposts of public account articles as the main content of communication in most online assemblages on the biggest social media platform in China, WeChat, as well as in the findings that multiple respondents mentioned they left social media platforms like Weibo and Douban because of the presence of commercial forces and logics on them in addition to tighter censorship.

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List of Abbreviations

ANT Actor Network Theory

NGO Non-governmental Organization