



Media Commercialisation and Political Control in Authoritarian Regimes: Explaining the Rise of We-media in China

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Declaration

I, Cong Nie, confirm that the thesis titled "Media Commercialisation and Political Control in Authoritarian Regimes: Explaining the Rise of We-media in China" is my own work. I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means (www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means). This work has not been previously presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

Abstract

The relationship between state political control and media commercialisation has been a pervasive and longstanding subject of academic debate. Drawing upon experiences from Western countries, this debate is conventionally framed within the paradigm of political control versus media commercialisation. However, in China, the dynamics and interplay between media and the state present a more nuanced and complex picture compared to conventional understandings. The emergence of We-media, a new form of digital media, illustrates a distinctive trajectory of development and commercialisation, indicating a shifting media landscape in contemporary China.

On one hand, the Chinese government, under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, has significantly tightened its control over the media. On the other hand, the rise of We-media highlights the potential for media development in today's China. This research seeks to address the central puzzle: why and how has We-media risen despite the increasing control strategies deployed by the state?

To resolve this puzzle, this study conceptualises the trajectory of We-media's rise in China and its interaction with state control. By examining the state's policies on We-media and the responses of We-media practitioners, this research argues that the growth of We-media in China is largely attributable to the interplay between the regulatory framework established by the state and the proactive strategies of We-media, epitomized by its distinctive Strategic Diversification (SD) Model. Consequently, the relationship between state control and media commercialisation in China is not binary, as suggested by conventional studies, but rather can be interpreted as a symbiotic relationship.

Keywords:

We-media, media commercialisation, political control, SD model

List of Abbreviations

BBS	Bulletin Board Systems
CAC	Cyberspace Administration of China
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCPPD	Chinese Communist Party Propaganda Department
CCTV	China Central Television
CERNET	China Education and Research Network
CGWNET	China Great Wall Communications
ChinaGBN	China Golden Bridge Net
CNCNet	China Netcom
CMNET	China Mobile
CNNIC	China Internet Network Information Centre
CNY	Chinese Yuan
CPD	Central Propaganda Department
CSL	Cyber Security Law
CSNET	China Satcom
CSTNET	China Science and Technology Network
FW	Finance Wuji
FYM	Fuguang Yuejin Media
IAPs	Internet Access Providers
ICTs	Internet Communication Technologies
ICPs	Internet Content Providers
ISPs	Internet Service Providers
KOLs	Key Opinion Leaders
MIIT	Ministry of Industry and Information Technology
PM	Propaganda Model
PRC	the People's Republic of China
SAPPRFT	State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and TV
SD	Strategic Diversification
SMEs	Small and Micro-sized Enterprises
SMS	Short-Message Systems
TMT	Technology, Media and Telecommunications

UGC	User-generated Content
UNINET	China Unicom
WTO	World Trade Organisation

Chapter 1 Introduction

In the modern era, the media has become “one of the most important social, cultural, and political institutions” in every society (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009, p. 2). It can function as a bridge, disseminating information from the state to society and framing social issues back to the state. This dual role enables the media to inform, awaken, or change the awareness of individuals and groups (Parkinson, 2006). The media's ability to set agendas and guide public attention underscores its significant role in shaping public discourse (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This power to shape discourse makes the media an essential pillar of democracy, but also a potential instrument for manipulation (Chomsky, 2011).

The commercialisation of media has further transformed its landscape, amplifying its reach and influence (McChesney, 2016). In the digital era, with the advent of digital platforms, media organisations have found increased opportunities for revenue generation and diversification of content (Küng, 2016). This has enabled a broader range of voices and perspectives to be heard, democratising information to some extent (Castells, 2013). However, commercial interests have made the media a formidable economic force, capable of swaying public opinion and societal norms more powerfully than ever before (Bagdikian, 2014).

In authoritarian regimes, the media's commercialisation presents a different dynamic. While economic interests are still at play, they often intertwine with state control, creating a complex landscape (Shirk, 2011). Under this circumstance, exploring the role media marketisation in authoritarian countries and how commercial media can survive under the intensive political control offers new insights into the media-state relations (Stockmann, 2013), and in particular, the tensions between the media commercialisation and political control in authoritarian regimes (Brady, 2009).

China, given its distinct political and media landscape, provides a different perspective to understand the relationship between media commercialisation and political control in authoritarian regimes. The media in China operates under a unique combination of stringent state control and vibrant commercialisation, making it a compelling case

study for examining how these forces interact. In particular, the emergence and ascendance of We-media in contemporary China stands as a testament to the complex dynamics at play.

1.1 Research background

In the past four decades, the media landscape in reform China has undergone a transformative evolution. During the transition, We-media, has emerged as a distinctive and influential player challenging traditional media structures. We-media, originating from the Chinese term "Zimeiti" (自媒体), also translated as "self-media," refers to self-published online content generated by independent individuals or small-scale entities (Fang, 2022; Wang, 2015). As a new form of digital media, it has played a significant role in Chinese people's daily life since the late 2000s, with now approximately 80% of Chinese internet users preferring We-media as the major channel for news content and information consumption, its significance becomes undeniable (CNNIC, 2019). Moreover, the number of We-media practitioners in China reached 9.7 million in 2021 (Lan, 2023). However, it also poses challenges to the current Chinese government under Xi Jinping's leadership.

The political environment under Xi has changed significantly compared to the previous Hu-Wen government, marking what Minzner (2018) refers to as "the end of an era" of reforming. Xi's tenure has seen a tightening of state control over various aspects of Chinese society, especially media, and this control has further intensified in recent years (e.g. Schlesinger, 2016; Bandurski, 2016; Repnikova, 2018; Li & Sparks, 2018), with implementing various policies to regulate and censor the information on the internet (Creemers, 2019). This includes requiring all digital platforms to monitor and report content, as well as ensuring that all online activity aligns with the party's ideological and political goals. This has significant implications for We-media, which depends heavily on digital platforms to create, disseminate and monetise their content. The need for compliance with state regulations and the risk of content being censored or removed creates a challenging environment for We-media creators.

This raises an intriguing question: Why has the rise of We-media been tolerated, especially under the intensified political governance of Xi Jinping's administration? Many scholars see the rise of We-media as down to inevitable media commercialisation fostered by the rapid digitalisation and increasing internet penetration in China (e.g. Sun & Jiang, 2017; Wang, 2020). For example, high-speed internet, widespread smartphone use, and the rise of digital media platforms have all contributed to making content creation and distribution more accessible (Wang, 2020; Wang, 2018). This technological advancement has empowered individuals to become content creators, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers (Lagerkvist, 2010). However, in a state where over four decades of media commercialisation has happened without significant media liberalisation despite changes and diversification in the media environment, censorship and propaganda remain pervasive (Shirk, 2011; Stockmann, 2013). Thus, We-media's proliferation cannot be simplistically attributed to technological or economic evolution. In particular, the development of internet technology has also provided the state with new tools for surveillance and control (Diamond, 2008), as the Chinese government has implemented sophisticated internet monitoring systems and strict regulations to manage the flow of information online (Jia & Winseck, 2018; Schneider, 2018). Hence, the development of media and shifts of government strategy over the media has shown a new puzzle regarding the conceptualisation of media, state control and the interplays between these two entities. This study aims to explore deeper into the underlying dynamics.

1.2 Research Focus and Research Questions

This research focuses on the interplay between media commercialisation and political control in authoritarian regimes, from the perspective of explain the rise of We-media in today's China. The main research question underpinning this project is: **Why has We-media expanded significantly in China despite growing political control?**

This central puzzle addresses the core paradox of this study that is understanding the factors and dynamics that have allowed We-media, a form of user-generated content based commercial media, to thrive in an environment of growing state control. It aims to uncover the reasons behind the growth of We-media and its relationship with the political strategies employed by the Chinese government.

This question leads to several sub-questions:

- 1) What strategies does the state adopt towards We-media?
- 2) How have We-media practitioners responded to the intertwined pressures of commercialisation and state strategies?
- 3) How do these dynamics impact content creation, distribution, and monetisation in China's We-media ecosystem?

In this regard, this study examines the relationship between the growing political control under Xi Jinping's leadership and the rise of We-media from three main angles: understanding the regulatory environment and government actions that influence We-media, exploring how We-media content creators navigate and respond to these pressures, and assessing the overall impact on the We-media ecosystem, including content creation, distribution, and monetisation. Together, these questions provide a comprehensive framework for exploring how We-media has flourished despite an growing authoritarian regime's tight control, addressing the core paradox of this study by examining the dynamic relationship between media commercialisation and political control in digital China.

1.3 The Academic Debates and Contributions

The interplay between media commercialisation and political control within authoritarian regimes has been a focal point of scholarly discourse, reflecting on the delicate balance between media's potential for democratisation and its utilisation as a tool for sustaining authoritarian governance. This study explores this intricate relationship, particularly focusing on the dynamics within China, the largest authoritarian regime, through the lens of We-media. By addressing key academic debates, this research aims to define and map out We-media in China and explore the media-state relationship in the digital age within an authoritarian context.

1.3.1 The Symbiotic Relationship between Media Commercialisation and Political Control in Authoritarian Regimes: Insights from We-media in China

For several decades, specifically since the 1960s, conventional studies have proposed that the liberalising role of the media is a potential threat to authoritarian systems. These perspectives, grounded in the experiences of Western societies during this period, suggest that the media can facilitate socio-political change and act as a catalyst for democratisation (e.g., Lerner, 1964; Schramm, 1964). This argument has been further discussed since the 1990s in the West, as the opening of media markets presented citizens in nondemocracies with an increasing array of information sources. Some find that media commercialisation helps to open societies and empower citizens with new and more choices of information sources, which would potentially promote political change (Gunther & Mughan, 2000; Norris, 2006).

The discussion is expanding especially in the digital age. The development of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly social media, has been viewed as “liberation technologies” (Diamond & Plattner, 2012). By providing an enormous increase in flows of information, they offer more ways to undermine authoritarian rulers and subvert state control over the media (Ferdinand, 2013; Qiang, 2011) and empower marginalised people to mobilise for freedom and accountability (Carlo Bertot et al., 2012; Gillmor, 2006; Howard, 2010).

However, some authoritarian regimes, for example in the case of China, the largest authoritarian regime with the rapid development of economy and media commercialisation, presents an exception to this optimistic view. Despite four decades of substantial media marketisation, China has skilfully avoided political instability (Shirk, 2011; Stockmann, 2013). Even in the digital era, where a certain amount of unfavourable information regularly occurs through the internet, the CCP remains securely in power (Stockmann, 2013; King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). This paradox challenges the anticipated political consequences of media commercialisation in authoritarian societies.

Indeed, some scholars doubt the inevitably logical relationship between media commercialisation and political change (e.g. Hassid, 2008; Heuvel and Dennis, 1993; Yu, 1994). Without fully-fledged privatisation of the media industry and a profound

structural change in the political system, media commercialisation alone has little power to challenge the rule of the authoritarian regime (e.g. Chan, 1993; Yu, 1994). Conversely, it has also been argued that media commercialisation, rather than undermining autocrats' power, can help provide a range of opportunities for the state to maintain their control and strengthen their impact on the society (e.g. Zhao, 1998, Zhao, 2010; Stockmann, 2013; Repnikova, 2018). For example, Stockmann (2013) claims that media commercialisation in authoritarian regimes can play a positive role in helping strengthen the ability of the central government to disseminate information by boosting the credibility of the media's reports. When accompanied by effective censorship and controlling strategies, commercial media can present state ideologies to the public in a more convincing way compared with the state-owned media (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011; Stockmann, 2013; Shirk, 2011).

Some studies on digital media in authoritarian regimes also hold a similar view. Jiang (2010) and DeLisle et al (2016) state that ICTs can also serve the regime's interest, providing various means for the authorities to censor the society and monitor public opinion and at times, to discover and target dissidents. Although different in emphasis, these studies above share a common focus on the consequences of media commercialisation to the leadership whether it potential undermines or helps to maintain their power in authoritarian regimes.

Media Commercialisation in China: A Unique Case

Focusing on China, the largest authoritarian regime in the world, scholars have noted that following Deng Xiaoping's initiative for economic reform in 1980s, Chinese media has been able to gain some financial autonomy and strength, suggesting a possibility of political freedoms (Chu, 1994; Hao, Huang, & Zhang, 1998; Huang, 1994; Huang & Yu, 1997; Liu, 2000; Lynch, 1999; Pei, 1994). For example, Pei argued that "Strong market forces [have] reduced the effectiveness of government censorship of the media by multiplying the channels of production and dissemination" (cited in Hassid, 2008, p. 417). However, these arguments often relied on Western paradigms of media-state relations, assuming an inevitable liberalising outcome (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), rather than consideration of the realities of China's model (Huang, 2007).

From the discussion above, there is significant variation regarding the ability of authoritarian regimes to restrict information flow and control the media. As Stockmann and Gallagher (2011) identify, stable one-party systems like China are more capable of manipulating and controlling the media by establishing institutions such as the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) to manage the overall media landscape. Additionally, Hadland & Zhang (2012) found that during the process of media marketisation, the Chinese government used media conglomeration to exert influence on the media structure and its content, facilitating capitalisation and economic efficiency while maintaining control (Zhao, 2000, p.323).

Xi Jinping's Approach: Increased Control Amidst Commercialisation

However, these debates raise questions when examining Xi Jinping's China, especially their discussion is mainly from the perspective of the impacts of the rise of commercial media in China since the 1980s, which is based on the reform and opening-up period of Chinese media. Xi Jinping's China has entered a new era of increasingly stringent control over society, particularly the media, with such control amplifying in recent years (Qiang, 2019). As highlighted, mainstream debates on the relationship between media commercialisation and political control often fall into the dichotomies of "promoting democracy versus strengthening authoritarianism" or "liberal versus control" (DeLisle et al., 2016, p. 3). However, these approaches are insufficient to understand the details of the media-state relation in current China in the digital era under Xi Jinping's leadership.

This study highlights the dual approach of Xi Jinping's administration, which utilises both economic performance and ideological control to sustain the CCP's legitimacy (Zeng, 2014). The CCP's sources of legitimacy and strategies for maintaining power have long been subjects of significant scholarly interest (Zheng, 2009). Xi's tenure has been marked by a dual approach to media: promoting economic development through digital innovation while simultaneously tightening political control to maintain the CCP's legitimacy and stability (Creemers, 2019).

By examining the government's dual approach to We-media and the strategies We-media practitioners use to navigate the dual pressures of economic gain and political compliance, the study reveals how the CCP's economic and ideological goals are

advanced through the development of We-media. This contributes to the understanding of how ideological control is being reinforced in the digital age, adding a complementary layer to the traditional performance-based legitimacy.

From this point of view, this study illustrates a symbiotic relationship between media commercialisation and state control, challenging the traditional view that these forces are inherently antagonistic. In Xi Jinping's China, market forces and political control operate in a complementary manner. This symbiosis is evident as commercial viability supports political governance, with We-media serving as a tool for both economic development and political propaganda. By examining the interplay between media commercialisation in the digital age and the state's tightening control of information dissemination through We-media's rise, this study offers fresh insights into the role of commercial media within authoritarian contexts, particularly within Xi Jinping's China.

1.3.2 Defining and Mapping out We-media in China

The second contribution of this study is addressing the gap in defining and mapping out We-media in China. In recent years, the phenomenon of We-media in China has gained considerable attention both within the country and internationally. Despite the growing significance of We-media, academic studies into this subject remain limited. Existing academic literature often conflates it with broader digital media trends or treats it as merely an offshoot of social media, leading to potential misinterpretations and overlooking its unique attributes (Wu, 2014). Some studies mistakenly equate We-media with social media and citizen journalism (e.g., Sun & Jiang, 2017; Dai, 2011; Zhang, 2008; Zhou, 2011). While it shares characteristics with both, We-media is distinct in its focus on content creation and monetisation. Social media prioritises social interaction and networking, whereas We-media centres on individual expression, content dissemination, and economic activities. Unlike citizen journalism, which primarily aims to democratise information and provide alternative perspectives, We-media in China has evolved with a strong commercial orientation.

To address this gap, this study offers a comprehensive definition that encapsulates the multifaceted nature of We-media in China. In this study, We-media refers to user-generated media based on the internet, encompassing a diverse range of platforms, including blogs, microblogs, live streaming, and short video services (Gilardi & Lam,

2022). These platforms enable individuals or small groups to publish, distribute, and monetise their content (Zhao, 2019). We-media merges technological advancements with individual creativity and commercial endeavours, forming a significant component of the digital media ecosystem. This definition acknowledges the grassroots origins of We-media and its evolution into a commercially viable entity within China's digital landscape (Meng, 2018).

To construct a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of We-media in China, this study also comprehensively maps the landscape of We-media in China. By exploring the process of media commercialisation within China's unique socio-political and economic environment, it provides a detailed context behind the emergence and the rise of We-media. This mapping exercise is significant as it operates on two crucial layers: the macro perspective of government policies and regulations, and the micro perspective of media practitioners.

From a macro perspective, mapping shows the significant role of the state's power in shaping the pathway of China's changing media landscape and We-media development. Government regulations and policies have profoundly influenced the creation, distribution, and monetisation of We-media content. The state's regulatory framework, encompassing censorship laws, content guidelines, and platform-specific restrictions, has steered the growth and operational boundaries of We-media. By delineating these regulatory influences, the study highlights how the state has managed to control and channel the digital media evolution in alignment with its socio-political objectives, thereby ensuring that We-media operates within permissible bounds.

From a micro perspective, the mapping explores the strategies and experiences of media practitioners who navigate this regulated landscape. It sheds light on how We-media content creators including individual, group, and platform-signed We-media practitioners adapt to regulatory constraints while pursuing commercial success. This perspective uncovers the innovative approaches taken by practitioners to engage audiences, monetise content, and maintain relevance in a competitive digital space.

By focusing on the adaptive strategies of We-media practitioners, the study underscores the resilience and innovation required to thrive in a highly regulated environment. This contributes to the understanding of how media actors in authoritarian regimes navigate and adapt to regulatory constraints, adding depth to the literature on media resilience and adaptation (Hassid, 2012; Jia & Winseck, 2018).

This comprehensive mapping contributes to a deeper understanding of both the top-down influences of state control and the bottom-up initiatives of media practitioners. It clarifies the definition of We-media by showing how it is shaped by regulatory frameworks and commercial strategies within China's unique context. Furthermore, it provides a framework for analysing the future trajectory and potential impacts of We-media on Chinese society, considering the interplay between governmental oversight and grassroots innovation.

1.4 Methodology

This study aims to understand the rise of We-media in China under the growing political control of the Xi Jinping government. To explore this question, the qualitative method is preferred, as it helps to understand and explain the tensions and dynamics of the We-media practitioners amid increasing political control and market competition. Unlike quantitative research, which posits that social reality can be understood neutrally and objectively through scientific approaches, qualitative research embraces a contextual, inter-subjective understanding of social reality (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Its strength lies in its unique capacity, through in-depth interviews and observation, to help researchers “see the world through the subject’s eyes” and learn to understand the underlying values of individuals and groups (Pierce, 2011, p.6; Bryman, 2016). For this project, qualitative methods offer an interpretative lens to see how We-media practitioners, who generate self-content for business on various digital media platforms, survive under restrictive censorship in China. In particular, this thesis combines two complementary qualitative methods with online in-depth interviews and policy documentary analysis.

Interviews are widely used in communication and social sciences to uncover “people’s ideas, their thoughts, their opinions, their attitudes, and what motivates them” (Berger,

2018, p. 113). Holstein and Gubrium (2003) define interviewing as a way to “generate empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives” (p.204). Given the theoretical and practical considerations, this project adopts online interviews as a viable alternative to traditional face-to-face interviews. Online interviews, also known as e-interviews, are conducted using internet-mediated communications through computers, mobile phones, or smart devices, allowing direct communication with participants anywhere and anytime they prefer (Salmons, 2015). While face-to-face interviews enable the observation of interviewees throughout the interview, online interviews without webcams may not satisfy that requirement (ibid.). However, online interviewing is flexible, as researchers can offer participants a degree of control over the research process by allowing them to choose between online text, voice messages, or video chats options (Hanna, 2012). Moreover, many studies confirm that participants may find online interviews less stressful and more relaxed, as they can be interviewed at home or at work, in a familiar and non-threatening physical environment (Gruber et al., 2008, pp. 257-258; Salmons, 2015). As a result, participants may be more willing to discuss sensitive or personal matters (McDermott & Roen, 2012; Paechter, 2013).

Another reason for favouring online interviews is that they “allow for the significant reduction or elimination of constraints that would make in-person interviews impractical”, such as international or socially isolated individuals and hard-to-reach populations (Salmons, 2021, p62). In this project, considering the pandemic situation and China’s Covid-19 restrictions during the research period from 2021-2022, it would have been challenging for the researcher to fly back to China for personal face-to-face interviews. Thus, online interviewing was chosen as an alternative.

Like face-to-face interviewing, online interviewing has three approaches, namely, structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2014). Among them, semi-structured and unstructured interviews are more conversational than the one-way process of structured interviews. They provide participants with an opportunity to freely share their views on the topic and allow for adjustments in the research focus if important issues arise during the conversations (Bryman, 2016; Taylor et al., 2015). Specifically, semi-structured interviews allow interviewers the opportunity to prepare a flexible interview guide before interviewing (Croucher & Mills,

2014, pp.157-9). In this study, since I already had a clear research focus, semi-structured interviews – where interviewers typically follow a flexible topic guide – were considered more suitable than unstructured interviews, since they encourage interviewees to respond “within their own frame of reference” (May, 2011, p.136). The semi-structured interview approach would help to gain a deeper understanding of the feelings of people working in We-media and the factors influencing their daily working routines for business.

However, qualitative interview, as a research method, has its limitations. It can be biased because participants might have specific agendas or a stake related to the research topic (Peters & Halcomb, 2015). The participants in this study are currently or were formerly dealing with We-media or have previously worked in the media system; they bring valuable insights due to their insider status. However, their close involvement with the industry means they may have biases based on their experiences, interests, and how they perceive the changes within the media landscape. Nevertheless, potential bias is not necessarily a negative issue in this research. My interviewees, as insiders and experts, including We-media practitioners and digital media employees, were expected to provide unique perspectives, valuable opinions and insights from their personal experiences regarding the research topic. Their expert opinions and insider views, despite their inherent bias, would be essential for gaining a comprehensive understanding at micro level of the rise of We-media and the changing media landscape in current China.

In addition to semi-structured interviews, this project also employs document analysis as a complementary method. Compared to qualitative interviews, document analysis is considered as an “unobtrusive method”, since documents are readily available and can be analysed without direct interaction (Bryman, 2016, p. 546). This study uses a broad definition of “documents” as “written text” (Bowen, 2009, p. 195; Prior, 2020). In this study, “documents” encompass a variety of sources, including government regulations, official documents from major digital platforms, publications related to We-media, and third-party research reports. Examples include some items published by China’s Propaganda Department, relevant official reports, papers, and speeches from the government, digital platform regulation mechanism guidelines, and some statistics collected by various organisations. By incorporating document analysis, the project

could gain a richer, more nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play in the We-media landscape and the broader media control environment in China.

Data from the above two methods – primary data from interviews and secondary data from documents – were combined to answer the research questions. In particular, interview data will be presented as direct quotes from the participants, while document data will be presented as excerpts, quotes, examples, and occasionally factual information for background and context. Despite the different methods of collecting data, the analytical procedures for both types are similar, involving selection, evaluation and synthesis. Additionally, for both methods, the data are structured into key themes, categories, or case examples (Anderson, 2010; Bryman, 2016).

1.4.1 Research Sampling and Data Gathering

This project applies the “purposive sampling” strategy. According to Bryman (2016), this approach involves selecting participants that are directly relevant to the research questions (p. 408). Given the focus of this research on how We-media operate, including We-media content creation, dissemination and consumption in China, two categories of relevant actors have been identified: We-media practitioners and We-media platform employees. The former group directly participate in the process of We-media content production, including such as content creators, editors, managers, and technologists working within We-media. The latter group indirectly impacts the We-media content production through platforms management.

Using the interview approach, this project conducted a total of 20 semi-structured interviews during the period from October 2022 to December 2022, with 14 conducted via WeChat audio calls and six done through WeChat video chats, as preferred by the interviewees. Among them, two interviewees were re-interviewed using WeChat text messages for follow-up questions¹. The interviewees included four We-media platform employees and 14 current or former We-media content creators/editors² in mainland China, who shared their experiences and views on dealing with We-media business

¹ WeChat is a primary instant messaging tool. It has a function similar to WhatsApp, providing free video and audio chat options.

² It is challenging to distinguish between We-media content creators and editors, as these roles are often performed by the same individuals within the We-media workforce.

in China (see the list of interviewees). All participants possessed substantive knowledge of the research topic, with half of them having more than five years of experience in We-media-related work. To ensure confidentiality, all interviewees have been anonymised in this thesis, with their names replaced by corresponding codes, for example, IE-1. Each interview lasted between 40 and 90 minutes and was recorded with approval. All the interviews were conducted in Chinese and later transcribed into English by the author. The two re-interviews were not audio-recorded but documented with written notes.

The decision to transcribe the interviews into English was made to facilitate the integration of data into an English-language thesis and to ensure accessibility for an academic audience (Squires, 2009; Temple & Young, 2004). Translating during the transcription process also saved time and reduced the risk of discrepancies during later translation stages (Regmi et al., 2010). However, this approach is not without challenges. Translating Chinese interviews into English may lead to a loss of cultural and linguistic nuances, and there is always a risk of translator bias (Birbili, 2000; Temple & Edwards, 2002). To mitigate these issues, the original Chinese transcripts were retained by the author alongside the English versions, and careful attention was given to preserving the integrity of the participants' narratives. This dual-language approach enhances transparency and allows for cross-validation of data if needed (Liamputtong, 2010).

The interviewees in this study are not intended to be representative due to the practical challenges encountered in securing interviews. It was extremely difficult to get individuals, especially We-media platform employees, to agree to participate. Given my background as a former journalist in China, I contacted respondents through my personal connections and then used a snowballing technique to identify other potential interviewees. We-media practitioners, being more independent and flexible, were more willing to accept interview request than We-media platform employees. Despite my efforts to contact more individuals working on We-media platforms, many declined to be interviewed. This reluctance may be partly due to the nature of my research topic, involving the current Xi Jinping governance which was perceived as "sensitive" by some potential interviewees.

However, the interviews conducted still provide valuable insights. Although the sample had not reached a point of saturation where additional data would no longer yield new insights into the issue being studied (Mason, 2010), they offer significant perspectives on the interplay between media operations and political control. To address this limitation, document analysis was incorporated as a supplementary method. For instance, the limited number of interviews with We-media platform employees was offset by examining official documents from these We-media platforms. This combined approach ensures a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

Using semi-structured interview guidelines, I posed general questions about the participants' work experience within the We-media workforce, their daily working routines, motivations for joining We-media, and their associated views on government regulations. For example, the interviews covered some relevant topics such as the daily business activities and operation of their We-media accounts, how they choose the topics of We-media content, the content producing process, factors that determine editorial choices, We-media practitioners' perspectives of their roles, and changes in digital content output in response to increasing censorship and restriction during Xi's era.

To ensure the ethical integrity of this research, I obtained ethical approval from the university and adhered to established ethical guidelines throughout the study. Each interview began with the respondents introducing themselves, including their years of experience in We-media or platforms, their former jobs, and their current positions. I was also open to exploring any topics that each interviewee considered important. In addition to collecting interview data, secondary document analysis was undertaken, examining internet regulation policy documents, public reports, and official statements from both governmental bodies and digital platform companies.

1.5 Key Argument and Findings

The main argument of this study is that the rise of We-media in China, despite increasing political control, is driven by the interplay of political and economic forces. The state has established a tight regulatory regime that limits the extent to which We-

media practitioners can pursue political aims. However, We-media practitioners are not passive recipients of state control. Instead, they actively respond to the state's strategies through a unique commercial approach known as the Strategic Diversification (SD) model.

This study finds that the rise of We-media in China is driven by a set of stimulative policies and strategies designed by the state, as We-media prosperity contributes to the state's goals of economic improvement and political propaganda. Concurrently, state control over We-media has evolved with new strategies to ensure that the rise of We-media does not challenge state authority or mainstream narratives. The operations of We-media in content creation, dissemination, and profit-seeking are characterised by the SD model, which help to balance the commercial success, audience expectations and political acceptability. This model exemplifies how adaptive content creation, audience identification, and risk mitigation work together to achieve this balance. Specifically, this study identifies three main features of the SD approach: a) creating multiple sub-channel accounts with each catering to distinct audience segments; b) delivering We-media content on multiple-platforms; and c) adopting a cost-effective content-washing strategy.

By employing this multi-faceted approach, We-media in China seeks to maximise audience reach and economic profitability while operating within the regulatory framework. In doing so, this study posits that the relationship between media commercialisation and political control in Xi Jinping's era is characterised by a dynamic interplay where market and political forces influence and shape each other. It highlights that in Xi Jinping's China, market forces and political control are not necessarily at odds but can operate in a complementary manner. In the case of We-media, the strategies employed by We-media practitioners demonstrate that commercial viability can coexist with, and even support, the overarching goals of political governance. This alignment is achieved through careful navigation and adaptation, ensuring that their content products remain engaging and compliant.

This intricate dance between commercialisation and political oversight offers a window into the evolving nature of governance and control in the digital age of Xi Jinping's China. It illustrates a symbiotic relationship where economic vitality and political

stability are mutually reinforcing. The confluence of market dynamism and political oversight in We-media practices reflects broader trends in Chinese governance, where economic strategies are harnessed to bolster political control. The adaptability and resilience of We-media practitioners in this environment underscore the fluidity and complexity of media operations under such a dual pressure system.

However, despite the flourishing of We-media, it remains highly constrained as a progressive force capable of pushing boundaries and holding the government to account. This distinguishes it from previous studies of the Chinese media, which tend to emphasise how journalists seek to push boundaries and challenge authority (Bandurski & Hala, 2010; Kuang, 2017; Tong, 2007). While We-media practitioners demonstrate adaptability and resilience, their operations highlight limitations in driving significant political change.

Ultimately, this study reveals that in Xi Jinping's China, We-media serves as a tool for reinforcing state objectives rather than challenging them, marking a significant shift in the role of media in Chinese society. This dual pressure system, where commercial viability is achieved without undermining political control, exemplifies a nuanced approach to governance in the digital age, ensuring that media innovation and state authority coexist in a carefully managed balance.

1.6 Overview of Chapters

This thesis is structured into seven chapters, including the introduction chapter and conclusion chapter. Each chapter addresses discrete research questions, building a cohesive narrative that explores the interplay between media commercialisation and political control in China, with a specific focus on We-media.

Chapter 2 addresses the theoretical framework adopted for this study, hinging on the political economy of media, specifically focusing on how political power and economic viability shape media operations, content, and survival strategies. It examines the interaction between state power and market forces and how these interplays influence media content and development. By emphasising the government's role in shaping media environment through the processes of state control and media survival, it

provides a nuanced approach to understanding how authoritarian regimes like China regulate media content and influence public discourse. Media, in order to survive, employ varying strategies to navigate these constraints. This chapter also introduces the SD Model, an original framework developed in this study to conceptualise the adaptive strategies We-media practitioners use to balance compliance with economic sustainability under authoritarian conditions. The dual focus on economic and political dynamics, complemented by the SD Model, offers a comprehensive lens to understand the complex interplay shaping the survival and functionality of media in China.

Chapter 3 explores the evolution of We-media in China and serves as a crucial foundation for understanding the profound transformation within China's media landscape. This chapter begins by defining We-media and highlighting its characteristics, such as the production of user-generated content, independence from traditional media institutions, reliance on digital platforms, and creation by individuals or small groups. This section also discusses the three primary forces that have driven the growth and prominence of We-media in China: media commercialisation, digital technological advancements and regulatory controls. This analysis is significant as it showcases how these elements collectively influence the development of We-media. By defining We-media and mapping its evolution in the changing media landscape, this chapter provides essential context for the subsequent analysis of We-media's role within the CCP's political strategy and its interaction with state regulations.

Chapter 4 examines the growth of We-media within the context of the CCP's political legitimacy, supported by government strategies and stringent regulations. It explores the foundational sources of the CCP's legitimacy, the specific challenges Xi Jinping faces, and how We-media contributes to the Party's economic and ideological goals. In particular, it explores Xi Jinping's model of We-media governance, highlighting the balance between promoting We-media growth and maintaining political control through regulatory measures. By juxtaposing the CCP's need for legitimacy with practical We-media governance, this chapter provides a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted strategies employed by Xi Jinping's administration, unravelling the nuanced dynamics between state power and digital media in contemporary China. Moreover, this chapter connects the theoretical framework and

the evolution of We-media by demonstrating how the CCP leverages We-media for political legitimacy, setting the stage for understanding the practical responses of We-media practitioners.

Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 of this study reflect on how We-media practitioners navigate and respond to the state strategies within the Chinese environment. Based on the fieldwork findings, these two chapters concentrate on revealing in detail how We-media practitioners, from a micro perspective, conduct their business as an effective response to the CCP's governance of We-media.

In particular, Chapter 5 explores the operational aspects of We-media, examining the types of We-media, funding resources and the factors shaping their content creation. By exploring their business activities and daily working processes, this chapter identifies the tension between independence and stability in We-media, exploring how practitioners navigate trade-offs between creative freedom and financial security. It shows that We-media practitioners in China face a significant challenge: independent We-media operators cherish their autonomy, but they often encounter financial instability. Conversely, those who partner with major digital platforms benefit from stable income streams but must adhere to strict content guidelines that can stifle creativity. Balancing compliance with state regulations and meeting diverse audience expectations is central to managing this dynamic.

Chapter 6 examines the SD Model developed by We-media practitioners to balance competing demands of regulatory compliance and audience engagement. It details strategies such as employing multiple accounts, delivering content on multiple platforms, and adaptive content creation. This chapter also explores how practitioners avoid directly challenging government regulations by focusing on compliance and strategic content creation. This approach reflects a unique Chinese model where market dynamism is instrumental to political control, offering a window into the evolving nature of governance and control in the digital age of Xi Jinping's China.

Chapter 7 as the concluding chapter synthesises the findings, discussing their implications for the broader understanding of media commercialisation and political control in authoritarian regimes. It reflects on the contributions to academic debates

and suggests directions for future research. It further discusses the limitation of this research and prospect of media in China.

Chapter 2: State Control and Media Survival: A Political Economy Perspective

Media has become a central battleground where political regimes exert influence and control. The communication scholar McQuail (2010) points out that the media can 'serve to repress as well as to liberate, to unite as well as fragment society, both to promote and to hold back change' (p.83). These multiple roles make media a critical and contested arena for almost all the societies, both in democratic and authoritarian states. Considering the power of media in shaping public opinion, setting agendas, and influencing the political discourse, it is always a contested space for any political regime, democratic or authoritarian, albeit in varying forms and intensities.

To investigate the media landscape in China through the pathway of development of We-media, this chapter presents a theoretical framework of state control and media survival from the lens of political economy perspective. As the topic of this project focuses on the interplay between growing political control and the market forces, and their impact and consequences in current China, the framework of political economy of media regarding the themes of political control, censorship, as well as government economic incentives in authoritarianism, and their impact on media content production in digital era, are particularly relevant.

In particular, this chapter comprises three sections. The first section centres on the rationale of the theoretical framework. Based on the extant literature, it exhibits what this framework is, and lays out why this framework could be applied for analysing media in China. The second section focuses on how this theoretical framework is constructed by engaging with and revising concepts and theories from the previous literature in this research field. Specifically, it shows how this framework is constituted by two main pillars: state control and media survival, which are the primary analytical scopes for this project. In the meantime, it also lays out the key concepts in each represents an original conceptual framework developed to understanding media survival within authoritarian systems, particularly commercial media in digital China.

The final section introduces the Strategic Diversification (SD) model, an original conceptual framework developed by the author to understand media survival strategies within authoritarian systems, with a particular focus on commercial media in digital China. The SD Model addresses gaps in the existing literature by examining how media practitioners employ adaptive strategies to sustain economic viability while operating under state-imposed restrictions. By bridging the dual themes of state control and media survival, the SD Model enriches the theoretical framework, providing a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms of political control exercised through media, especially with regard to censorship and economic incentives. In doing so, this chapter demonstrates how a political economy approach effectively supports this project's aims.

2.1 The rationale of the framework of political economy of media

The study of political economy has long served as a framework to understand the relationships between individuals and society, markets, and the state. Heilbroner (1985) describes it as “a study of how politics shapes the economy and how the economy shapes politics”. He underscores the role of power dynamics in shaping economic structures and outcomes. Similarly, Robinson (2004) posits that political economy examines “the production, distribution, and exchange of resources within the context of political power relations”. Classical political economists like Adam Smith focused on capitalism as a system for managing wealth (Aspromourgos, 2008). Later work, expanded through the critical perspectives of Marx and Engels (2019), offers a Left lens through which these dynamics can be examined, emphasising the role of political decision-making in economic growth and an increasing concern about the expansion of capitalism and discomfort about power interests (McChesney, 2000, 2008).

During this process, state, as an entity, enjoys a monopolistic and legitimised power to enforce laws, manage resources and maintain order (Dusza, 1989; Weber, 2016). Besides that, contemporary theorists like Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu have extended state power by emphasising its role in controlling and managing information. Giddens (1986) introduces the idea of the state wielding power through ‘allocative and

authoritative resources', encompassing both material capabilities and the control of information (p. 178). Bourdieu's notion of 'information capital' further explores how states exert power through cultural and symbolic means, influencing public perception and norms by controlling ideas, images, and information (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 41). Their theories both underscore the state's multifaceted role in managing, controlling and influencing the information and media landscapes (Yang, 2009).

The Media, as one main resource and a conduit for information and a forum for public discourse, acts as an extension of Giddens' idea of 'allocative and authoritative resources', as well as the notion of 'information capital' from Bourdieu. According to Mosco (2009), the framework of political economy examines 'the social relations, particularly power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources, including communication resources' (p. 24). Given the significant role media plays in the state, market, and society, this theory of political economy has been extensively applied in media studies. In this context, the media is recognised as a diverse and dynamic entity and a part of the economic structure, rather than being merely a tool for disseminating ideological messages (McChesney, 2004). It extends beyond traditional news press to include digital and social media platforms.

More specifically, this framework probes into the complex dynamics of media behaviours, engaging with the media content's production, dissemination, and consumption, exploring how these elements are both influenced by and contribute to shaping state policies and market forces. This perspective provides a critical lens through which to understand the interactions between media systems and the broader socio-economic and political structures that govern them.

By examining the influence of power and wealth on media systems, the political economy of media sheds light on the underlying reasons why certain messages become prioritised or marginalised in the media landscape. Unlike other theoretical frameworks, such as some cultural studies, which primarily focus on content analysis³,

³ The cultural studies approach tends to focus on the signs, symbols, and meanings within media texts, exploring how these elements relate to identity, power, and culture, emphasising the relationship of media 'texts' to the audience. See how some scholars, such as Fiske (1987) and Morley (1980), are particularly concerned with the question of how cultural power

the political economy theory of media suggests that the media landscape is significantly influenced by political and economic factors, and highlights how these factors shape media production, distribution and content, rather than merely analysing the content texts itself (Fenton, 2007). This critical stance allows for a deeper understanding of media beyond mere content analysis, looking at the systemic factors that drive media practices and the dissemination of information.

It is also different from quantitative communication research, which employs statistical methods to study media effects, audiences, and communication processes, and assumes the existing economic system to be a given or neutral backdrop, and discounts the structural factors that could explain media behaviours and content⁴. Instead, the political economy approach in media studies seeks to explain the emergence of capitalism and its effects on media. For example, it critically questions how capitalist imperatives, such as profit maximisation and advertising economics, shape media content (Hardy, 2014), leading to commodification of content and audiences and, by extension, influencing the media-state relations, and the broader socio-political landscape.

Furthermore, the political economy perspective also interrogates how political forces influence this process. The rationale behind this framework is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing from economics, political science, sociology, and communication studies to provide a holistic view of the media. This allows for a comprehensive analysis that includes not just economic models but also the role of government policies, technological changes, and social factors in shaping media landscapes. Thus, if we bring this theoretical lens to media study in China, this theory could offer an insightful understanding of the development and transformation of Chinese media for at least two reasons.

or cultural forms are produced, distributed and interpreted through technical devices. Cultural studies scholars argue that political economists are primarily concerned with the economic and the production process in the media under a simplistic notation of ideology (Wasko, 2004). Accordingly, they charge the study with generally neglecting text, discourse, audience and consumption together with ignorance of audience power. In this context, cultural studies are interested in media "text" and, within that, process and "meaning" are variable and depend on the audience context.

⁴ The quantitative communication research employs statistical methods to study media effects, audiences, and communication processes. This approach typically takes the existing capitalist system as a given framework within which media operates. It may focus on behaviour patterns and audience responses without deeply questioning the structural economic factors that underpin the media system. See in Riffe, D., Lacy, S., Fico, F., & Watson, B. (2019). *Analyzing media messages: Using quantitative content analysis in research*. Routledge.

First, the socio-political context of China is significantly divergent from that of Western society (Wong, 1997). In many Western societies, there is often a clearer distinction between the market and the state. The media, for example, may operate predominantly under market principles, driven by advertising revenue, audience ratings, and competition, with the state's role limited to regulation and ensuring fair competition (Curran & Seaton, 2018; McChesney, 2000). It would create a paradigm of 'market commercialisation versus state control', which suggests a tension where media commercialisation is seen as potentially clashing with state control (Croteau & Hoynes, 2013; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). However, this paradigm might not fully apply to China due to its unique socio-political structure. In China, media commercialisation has occurred, with media sectors seeking revenue through advertising and other market-based strategies. Nevertheless, the state maintains a strong grip on media content, regulatory frameworks, and even the overall direction (Stockmann, 2013; Zhao, 2008). The Chinese government exerts control through censorship, ownership of major media organisations, and regulatory mechanisms that ensure alignment with state policies and objectives (Lynch, 1999). Media entities in China operate within a framework where state influence is a constant, and market dynamics are often subject to political considerations. This distinctive interplay shapes the media landscape in unique ways, necessitating a nuanced approach to understanding its development and transformation. For example, the Confucian-legalistic tradition-based state-building in China has largely determined that clear-cut boundaries between state and society and between state and market do not exist (Zhao, 2015). Rather, market and society in China are largely seen as embedded within state authority. In this case, state intervention exists by default in both social and economic spheres and the intertwining of state intervention with market and social force plays a crucial role in shaping the landscape of various sectors, including media.

Second, over the past forty years, China's media landscape has undergone significant changes and transformations. Although the exact trajectory of these changes is in dispute, the market commercialisation and political control have been two primary forces shaping the landscape of media today. Instead of inquiring 'which force is more decisive', what matters here is: a) how state power interacts with market forces; b) how these interplays influence media content and development.

In this sense, the framework of the political economy of media enables this project to dovetail the state power with the market forces in Chinese media development. This theme is evident in numerous studies. For example, Zhao (2008) explores the coexistence and tension between state control and market forces, examining how economic reforms and state policies jointly shape media practices. Lynch (1999) investigates the adaptive strategies of China's propaganda system in response to market dynamics, emphasising the intertwined nature of political and economic influences. Stockmann (2013), in her book *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*, provides a detailed analysis of how media commercialisation has led to a more diverse media landscape with increased credibility shaping public opinion in China, illustrating the delicate balance the state maintains between allowing market-driven media growth and retaining strict control over political content.

However, while these studies provide valuable insights into the interplay of state and market forces, their focus has mainly been on traditional media and its commercialisation under state control. My research uniquely focuses on how media operate within a market-driven environment while simultaneously navigating the political constraints imposed by the government, specifically from the lens of the rising new digital commercial media – We-media, which represents a newer and rapidly evolving segment of the digital media landscape. This allows to explore how digital platforms and social media influencers operate within the constraints imposed by the state. By starting with and then revising the political economy of media, this analytical framework can uniquely address the complexities of Chinese media development. It allows for a deeper understanding of how state intervention, market forces, and the socio-political context influence media practices and content in China, providing insights into the dynamics of media transformation in a non-Western context.

2.1.1 Some key concepts

Before I elaborate on how the framework of this project is constructed, there are some core concepts of political economy of media which are worthy of discussion. According to Mosco (2009, 2014), the political economic theory has three core processes critical to media analysis: commodification, spatialisation and structuration. They form the

basis for understanding how power and wealth impact media production, distribution, and consumption within the political economy of media framework.

Specifically, commodification involves turning media content and audience attention into marketable products, a concept initially articulated by political economist Dallas Smythe (1981) in the early 1980s. Even coming to the 21st century, the “attention economy” within today’s media industry still serves as a prerequisite for economic success (Gambaro, 2012). In this economy, content such as videos, television programs, and websites, often provided at little or no cost to the consumers, is predominantly financed by advertising revenue. Advertisers, in turn, are afforded the opportunity to showcase their products to a captive audience, a transaction that epitomises the commodification process. This economic arrangement reveals the profound influence of market forces on the media industry.

The attention economy is a global phenomenon; even in authoritarian regimes like China, it still operates within a tightly controlled media environment, especially in the digital era. This dynamic raises critical questions about the content's integrity, as media messages might fail to criticise capitalism or consumerism to align with advertisers' interests. This examination of commodification can shed light on the strategies employed by digital media players to align with or creatively circumvent state and market pressures, offering an insightful view of how economic forces shape media practices in an authoritarian context.

The spatialisation concept is equally important. It refers to how media overcome geographical constraints, rendering distance increasingly irrelevant in the context of information dissemination and communication technologies. For example, television overcomes distance by bringing images of world events to every part of the globe. This spatialisation dimension has been further facilitated in the digital age by the development of information and communication technology, along with computer-mediated communication, offering unprecedented opportunities for businesses to operate and compete in international markets (Winseck, 2011). However, the spatialisation of media is not without its limitations, particularly in contexts like China, where state control imposes significant constraints on the space of media (Zhao, 2008). Despite the global potential of spatialisation, the Chinese government's control and

regulations on content and the internet infrastructure limit the extent to which media can transcend geographical boundaries within and beyond the country (Brady, 2009; Hassid, 2008; Roberts, 2018). The dynamics highlight the complex interplay between technology, policy, and power within the political economy of media in China. For this project, this concept would help to explore how We-media practitioners manage these constraints and leverage digital platforms to reach audiences both within and beyond China, providing insights into the adaptive strategies and innovative practices that characterise the Chinese digital media ecosystem.

Lastly, the concept of structuration plays an important role in understanding the intricate ways social structures, such as class, gender, and race, shape and are shaped by media. Many studies illustrate that media content often reflects and reinforces the existing social hierarchies, potentially exacerbating inequalities related to class, gender, and race (Brooks & Hébert, 2006). For example, inequalities in income, education, and social status significantly impact the access to mass media and new communication technologies (Downing & Husband, 2005). By examining the content and distribution of media through the lens of structuration, we can identify patterns of representation that either marginalise or entirely exclude certain groups.

This project mainly adopts the perspective of how economic imperatives and state's control influence digital media practices in China, by exploring how We-media practitioners adapt to and operate within China's unique digital landscape, where economic opportunities are vast, yet tempered by regulatory constraints, while the broader social relations addressed by structuration are not the focus of this study. Thus, the first two processes of commodification and spatialisation stand out, as they allow for a detailed examination of the creative and strategic responses to the intertwined forces of market demand, technological innovation, and state regulation, providing a comprehensive understanding of digital media's evolution in China.

Another emphasis of the political economy of media framework focuses on the dual processes of state control and media survival (Stockmann, 2013; Zhao, 2008). This approach involves analysing the evolution of capitalism, including its cyclical nature, the rise of monopoly capital, and the crucial role of the state in shaping economic and social life. More specifically, this approach looks at how political power engages with

the media market, and how political policies impact the activities of media organisations, technology and media systems as well as ownership and mechanisms. A critical aspect of this framework is its focus on both the 'state control and media survival' aspects, highlighting how power is exercised within society to organise and manage relationships between individuals and groups.

In general, the control aspect of this approach examines the influence of various entities, such as the state, corporations, and media organisations, in shaping societal norms, behaviours, and expectations (McChesney, 2004). For example, by deciding which issues are highlighted and how they are presented in the media, these entities can influence public opinion and societal norms, guiding social behaviour by promoting certain values and ideologies. From this perspective of political economy of media, light is shed on the political power in influencing the behaviours of the media through various mechanisms and government policies. Survival processes are mainly economic, focusing on the production, distribution, and consumption of the media. This includes, for example, how media content and information are generated, how their work is organised, and how the benefits of economic activities are shared. It also involves the impact of economic policies and practices on media business models (McChesney, 2008; Nichols & Martínez, 2019; Winseck, 2011).

As for my project, it explores how media operate within a market-driven environment while simultaneously navigating the political constraints imposed by the government, from the lens of the rising new digital commercial medium – We-media. This framework of political economy of media is particularly relevant to this study because it directly addresses the interplay between economic factors, such as commercialisation and business models, and political control within the media landscape. It goes beyond merely economic concerns on the production, distribution, and consumption of media, also highlighting political concerns and how media reflects and reinforces power relations within society, which would be useful to analyse the intersections of state control, market forces, and digital transformation, all within the context of China's unique socio-political and economic framework. In the following section, I will discuss some influential studies on the theoretical framework of political economy of media and give an analysis of how this framework can be adapted to suit my project.

2.2 The State's Role in Media Control and the Economic Survival of Media: A Political Economy Perspective

The political economy of media provides a critical lens for examining the interplay between state mechanisms of control and the operational dynamics of media. This framework highlights the dual processes of state control and media survival, emphasising the government's extensive involvement in shaping media environments. This involvement ranges from traditional control mechanisms to more nuanced approaches that authoritarian regimes like China employ to regulate media content and influence public discourse. In return, the media organisations and media practitioners respond to these controls with varying strategies. These range from compliance and alignment with state narratives to subtle resistance and the use of digital platforms to circumvent censorship. The agility of media practitioners in navigating these constraints is a testament to the dynamic nature of media-state relations.

2.2.1 State Control and Media Survival in China: The Symbiotic Relationship

The relationship of state control and survival of media has traditionally been viewed as antagonistic, particularly from a Western media studies perspective (Garnham, 2000). However, it shows a different image in the context of China, particularly with respect to media commercialisation. Media commercialisation in China started in the late 1970s, along with the 'opening policy' of the Deng Xiaoping era. It introduced market dynamics into the media landscape, encouraging media organisations to innovate and diversify their content to attract audiences and advertisers, thereby securing financial sustainability (Yuyan, 2019). Within an authoritarian context, this economic imperative drives commercial media to develop content that is not only politically acceptable but also appealing to a wider audience. This dynamic is crucial to understand the Chinese media environment, showing a blend of government control and media thriving that's unique to China.

Recognising the uniqueness of China, Zhao Yuezhi's work is an influential contribution to understanding the complexities of media-state relations in contemporary China, from the perspective of political economy of media. In her early work, Zhao (2008) offers a nuanced perspective on the Chinese media landscape, highlighting the dual

forces of state control and market dynamics. By focusing on the intertwined relationship between the state and capital, Zhao's model helps explain the unique position of Chinese media, which must balance financial independence with adherence to political directives. This balance is crucial for understanding how media content is shaped and restricted in China. Moreover, according to Zhao (2011), the state and capital, in collaboration and contestation, have shaped 'the institutions, processes, and contents of contemporary Chinese communication' (p. 11). This approach aligns with the political economy perspective, which examines how media ownership, market structures, and political environments shape media content and practices.

Recent studies, including those by Stockmann (2013; 2011), explore the symbiotic relationship between media commercialisation and political control within the Chinese authoritarian context, from the perspective of examining how political and economic forces within the media industry intersect with political control mechanisms in an authoritarian regime. By exploring the relationship between media commercialisation and political control in China, she discusses how the state has adapted its control strategies in light of media market forces, employing selective censorship to allow economic growth while maintaining political control to ensure political stability.

Specifically, in her book *Media Commercialisation and Authoritarian Rule in China*, Stockmann (2013) explores the dynamics of media commercialisation under authoritarian governance, focusing on the tension between media commercialisation — the drive for profitability through market mechanisms — and the authoritarian state's imperative for political control and stability. Her work elucidates why and how the CCP allows for certain degrees of media freedom and market dynamics while still maintaining tight control over politically sensitive content. Stockmann suggests that the marketisation of media serves as a strategic resolution to the authoritarian rulers known as the dictator's dilemma, a challenge authoritarian rulers face in balancing control over information with the need to understand public sentiment (pp.30-32). By adopting market principles, media not only garners insights into citizen perspectives but also bolsters its legitimacy among the populace.

According to Stockmann and Gallagher (2011), single-party states like China would more easily and effectively control the media and information flow, and media can be used as a tool to reinforce and sustain authoritarian rule, as long as the state has the ability to control it. Their work challenges the assumption that media exposure and diversification inherently lead to democratisation. Instead, it presents the media as a potential stabilising force within authoritarian regimes, contributing to the durability of these systems rather than their dissolution.

These studies collectively shed light on our understanding of state control and media survival within authoritarian contexts like China. By promoting media commercialisation, these governments aim to make their regimes more stable. On the other hand, state intervention also brings prosperity to the development of media. This is because media development not only contributes to the broader social economy, but more importantly, it also allows the state to exercise more strategic control over information. By intervening in media development, the state can enhance its capacity to manage and reshape information to serve its interests. Now, the question is how did state control and media survival become intertwined in the case of We-media in China?

The following section introduces the establishment of the theoretical framework for this study, focusing on state control and media survival from the perspective of political economy of media. This framework is primarily based on the two pillars: a) State control; and b) Media survival.

2.2.2 State control: Information control, censorship, and mechanisms

Political control, as defined by Hassan et al. (2022), encompasses the ability of the state or a governing authority to exercise influence, maintain power, and authority over a population, territory, or a particular aspect of government. This involves enforcing laws, implementing policies, and seeking for compliance from society (p. 157). Emerging literature identifies several key strategies of political control, such as repression, censorship, indoctrination and coercive distribution (Albertus et al., 2018; Davenport, 2005; Ward & Benjamin, 2023). For example, repression, as defined by Davenport (2005), refers to some physical violence or the threat of violence that serves to suppress dissent. This tactic is frequently used in authoritarian regimes where the

government typically exercises a high degree of violent repression to suppress dissenting voices over society. More importantly, it can generate a climate of ‘silencing fear’, as seen in Syria under President Bashar al-Assad (Pearlman, 2016). However, more recent studies argue that repression in China is much broader than just physical violence. For instance, the study of Fu (2023) on televised confessions highlights how such non-violent forms of repression are used to intimidate and control the populace. Similarly, censorship, which involves restricting access to information, also falls under the broader category of repression. Indoctrination is another critical strategy of political control, where the government seeks to influence public opinion and reinforce its ideology through controlled media content and educational curricula (Ward & Benjamin, 2023). This tactic ensures that the populace internalises the state’s values and perspectives, reducing the likelihood of dissent.

This control extends to the media landscape. In authoritarian systems like China, the media operates under significantly higher constraints and regulations than in democratic societies. The intricate relationship between the media and the state exemplifies political control, where regulatory bodies and legal instruments are often used to exert control over media. This dynamic is poignantly captured by Cullen and Choy (2004), who note that the political solidarity of China's one-party system relies heavily on maintaining ideological unanimity through close state control of all information flows.

In this regard, as the first pillar of the research framework, the state political control is constituted by three strategic mechanisms: a) traditional control; b) flexible and selective controlling strategy; c) porous censorship. Each of these mechanisms has its own rationale and approach in state control over the media, whilst these mechanisms complete and complement each other.

a) Traditional censorship of media system: Structural, coercive, monetary and ideological control

Censorship, as explored through the works of Brady (2009), Esarey (2006), and other influential scholars, can be broadly defined as the systematic regulation, suppression, or elimination of content that is deemed undesirable or threatening by a governing body, particularly in media and public discourse. This concept is deeply intertwined

with efforts by authoritarian regimes, notably the state, to maintain control over the narrative, suppress dissent, and ensure the stability of their rule (Hassid, 2008; Hu, 2003; Esarey, 2005; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). This broad spectrum of control extends beyond mere regulation, embedding itself within the economic activities of media, including market regulation and trade policies (Esarey, 2005; Lynch, 1999; Stockmann, 2013; Zhao, 2008). Drawing on the insights from these scholars, censorship in authoritarian contexts like China can be characterised by several key dimensions, namely, structural, coercive, monetary, and ideological control.

Structural control

Structural control involves organisational and regulatory mechanisms that shape the media landscape. This form of control is evident in the government's regulatory bodies tasked with overseeing and regulating media. In the case of China, for example, all the media organisations should be registered under the state or in the local propaganda departments (Brady, 2009; Shambaugh, 2017). These institutions also have the authority to give the media organisations editorial guidelines, appoint and dismiss personnel (Esarey, 2005; Hu, 2003; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). It also includes licensing requirements imposed on digital platforms (Stockmann, 2013). This control extends to regulatory bodies like the Cyberspace Administration of China, which plays a pivotal role in overseeing online content.

Coercive control

Coercive control represents a direct and often punitive approach used by the government to ensure compliance with its policies and censorship rules. It involves the use of force or threats to ensure compliance with government policies and censorship rules. This form of control is more direct and often punitive, aimed at suppressing dissent and maintaining the dominance of the state's narrative. As scholars like Tong and Sparks (2009), Wang (2016), and Wang and Lee (2014) have noted, the authoritarian regime in China employs a variety of coercive measures to control the media, including the deletion of inappropriate reports, imprisonment of media practitioners, and the shutdown of news organisations and online platforms. Some scholars address that in China, coercion is still the main means of the control over the society to 'safeguard the supremacy of the Chinese version of Communist ideology' (He, 2003, p. 208). This strategy is particularly emphasised in the late Hu Jintao and

current Xi Jinping's governances, shown in their treatment of critical journalists and online activists, which includes surveillance, harassment, and intimidation by state security forces (Brady, 2017b; Wang, 2016). For instance, prominent journalists such as Gao Yu and online activists like Liu Xiaobo have been imprisoned for their critical writings and advocacy for democratic reforms (BBC News, 2017; 2014). Furthermore, the state employs methods such as televised confessions, as explored by Fu (2023), to publicly shame and discredit these individuals, thereby deterring others from engaging in similar activities.

Monetary Control

Monetary control of the Chinese media represents a subtler, yet equally significant form of control compared to structural and coercion strategies. This approach involves leveraging economic incentives and penalties to influence media content and operations, impacting both traditional and digital media spheres (Esarey, 2005, 2006; Hassid, 2008). For example, in China, a journalist's compensation is often directly tied to the number of stories published. This creates a monetary incentive to produce content that aligns with government directives (Hassid, 2008; Tong, 2015). This control strategy links tightly with the other two control strategies talked about above. As mentioned, by adopting structural control the top managers of most media organisations are appointed directly by the propaganda department under central or local governments, and they are tasked with ensuring that news reports are both "politically acceptable and popular with consumers" (Esarey, 2005, p. 37). In this regard, media practitioners that deviate from the party line or explore sensitive topics face not only the risk of censorship but also economic repercussions. These can include reduced income, loss of bonuses, or even job termination. This dual requirement encourages the production of content that is both commercially viable and politically compliant.

Under the increasing restrictions over media, many topics which could be reported before are now untouchable. This controlling strategy creates a strong monetary incentive to the journalists to toe the party line to ensure publication. As Lee et al. (2006) observe, in Shanghai and Shenzhen, two cities in China with high development of commercial media, journalists were incorporated into the Party-market alliance for achieving the maximum economic gains ensured by the Party.

In Hassid's new work (2020), he identified a new form of economic censorship which has been overlooked by many studies. This form of censorship, distinct from the more widely studied political censorship, involves press restrictions primarily for economic reasons. It highlights how the Chinese government not only seeks to control the narrative around politically sensitive topics but also extends its censorship apparatus to cover economic reporting and information that could impact the perception and stability of China's economic environment.

For example, the state would forbid the media to report any negative news related to financial markets or some large companies, many of which are state-owned. The primary aim of this censorship is to protect the economic interests of these entities. The consequences of such censorship can significantly impact competitors and ordinary investors, affecting transparency and fairness in the market. This concept suggests that censorship in China is not only a tool for political control but also extends into the economic sphere, where information about financial markets, company performance, and economic policies is controlled to maintain confidence in the Chinese economy and the Communist Party.

Ideological Control

Ideological control, especially through propaganda and thought work, refers to a strategic blend of tactics of the authority, aiming at shaping public opinion, reinforcing state power, and suppressing dissent (Brady, 2009; Lynch, 1999). In the case of Chinese media, as Zhao (2008) identifies, this control normally involves, for example, requiring the use of media to disseminate government-approved narratives, values and ideologies, such as national unity, loyalty to the state and patriotism. It is also frequently used on the digital environment, leveraging the internet and social media to pro-state narratives, such as through the 'fifty-cent Army' (Han, 2015).

In conclusion, these four controlling strategies – structural, coercive, monetary, and ideological control – reveal a comprehensive and multi-layered approach to media regulation and censorship. Each strategy serves a distinct purpose, but they are interrelated and work in concert to maintain the state's control over information and public discourse.

In particular, structural control in the context of Chinese media forms the basis of the media regulation framework. It involves a comprehensive system wherein the state exercises control over the entire media landscape, from ownership to content creation, distribution, and regulation. By establishing a controlled media environment at the foundational level, structural control sets the stage for implementing coercive, monetary, and ideological control strategies effectively. While structural control sets the rules and boundaries, coercion control is the enforcement mechanism that ensures compliance with these rules, with punitive measures like arrests, fines, and shutdowns for non-compliance. It complements structural control by providing a deterrent against deviation from state-imposed media guidelines and policies.

Unlike the overt nature of coercion control, monetary control exerts a more subtle and indirect influence on media content, encouraging self-censorship and pro-government narratives for financial benefits. Monetary control uses economic incentives and penalties to influence media content. This approach leverages the market dynamics and commercial interests of media organisations to align their operations with state objectives. All these media control strategies are deeply rooted in the political ethos of the one-party system led by the Communist Party, playing a fundamental role in shaping the information landscape of the nation.

It also important to note that this approach of media regulation and censorship, encompassing structural, coercive, monetary, and ideological control, illustrates the flexibility and selectivity inherent in the authoritarian control of media. This approach allows authoritarian regimes to effectively manage and manipulate public discourse in a way that supports its stability and legitimacy while responding to changing societal and technological landscapes. The next section discusses some influential studies of the flexible and selective control strategies and how the described mechanisms of censorship and controls relate to them.

b) Flexible and Selective Control of Media in Authoritarian Regimes

Compared with the traditional approaches of state control over the media, flexible and selective control emerges as a new control strategy, which has been extensively adopted in Chinese government in the last few decades. Generally, this strategy

selectively censors certain types of information whilst allows other “sensitive” information or criticism. It creates a limited “free space” for speech to the public. By doing so, it significantly decreases the risk and cost of censoring that information.

The development of internet communication technologies has ushered in sophisticated state approaches to managing public opinion and controlling information flows (Lin, 2018). As also observed by Tsai (2016), with the public's increased access to network information, the CCP has realised the old means of controlling public opinion, such as covering up, delaying, deleting and suppressing information, are gradually losing their efficiency. Rather than relying solely on overt censorship and repression, the government has developed broader, more flexible and selective strategies to manipulate public discourse in the digital era. This next section examines key studies that explore the dynamics of flexible or selective media control.

King, Pan, and Roberts' collective research (2013, 2014, 2017) presents a nuanced view of censorship and information control within authoritarian regimes, with a particular focus on China. Their findings reveal an extensive censorship apparatus focused more on preventing collective action than suppressing all forms of criticism. This distinction is crucial because it highlights the Chinese government's strategic approach to maintaining control: while some criticism of the government is allowed, any content that could lead to organised dissent or collective movements is swiftly censored. In particular, their work is highly regarded for its innovative use of quantitative methods to understand the nature and extent of censorship in the Chinese media and online platforms. This approach provides empirical evidence and a systematic analysis of censorship practices, revealing the scale and specific targets of the Chinese censorship apparatus. By quantifying the extent of deleted social media posts and analysing patterns in censorship, they found that the scale of censorship in China is extensive, involving the deletion of millions of social media posts and a significant amount of manpower and resources. This large-scale effort underscores the government's prioritisation of stability and control over the potential unrest that could arise from collective actions.

However, different from some traditional idea that the Chinese government suppresses any voices that criticise it, they confirm that the Chinese government's

censorship efforts are more focused on preventing collective action, rather than suppressing all forms of criticism. Posts on Chinese social media that are critical of the state but do not have the potential to mobilise people or create collective action are less likely to be censored compared to those that do (King et al., 2013). Their studies show some evidence of selective censorship that the government permits some criticism but censors posts that could lead to collective action, highlighting a nuanced approach to information control.

This selective censorship approach is complemented by the speed and efficiency of the censorship mechanism in the digital era. For example, the Chinese government monitors social media in real-time and can quickly respond by deleting posts or blocking discussions that are seen as threatening. Additionally, they identify that the so-called “50 Cent Army” (Han, 2015), which fabricates millions of social media posts and comments each year on Chinese cyberspace to distract the public from controversial or politically sensitive topics through the mass production of social media posts, illustrates a proactive strategy to guide public opinion and prevent social unrest (King et al., 2017). This approach allows for some level of dissent while effectively preventing collective action, demonstrating a sophisticated balance between control and the appearance of openness.

c) The Porous Censorship Model

Building on King et al.’s collective research, Roberts, one of the team members, introduces a “porous censorship model” in her book *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China’s Great Firewall* (2018), which expands on the understanding of censorship tactics by articulating three mechanisms of censorship – fear, friction, and flooding. These three mechanisms illustrate the complex ways in which the Chinese government manages information flow to maintain control over public discourse.

According to Roberts, “censorship through fear is based fundamentally on the awareness of the punishment that can be expected if the collection, production, or consumption of particular types of information is carried out” (Roberts, 2018, p. 44). This mechanism functions by dissuasion and self-censorship of the potential repercussions for free expression and information access (King, Pan, & Roberts,

2013). Importantly, Roberts (2018) notes that this form of censorship specifically targets the more influential people that are considered more credible threats to the regime's stability, such as activists, journalists, and public opinion leaders (*ibid.*), rather than the general population. From the party's perspective, the pros of censorship through fear include its effectiveness in deterring high-profile dissent and maintaining control over influential voices. However, the cons include the potential for backlash if the punishment becomes widely perceived as unjust or overly harsh, which could erode public trust and increase resistance.

Instead of exploiting fear, Roberts argues that the CCP also frequently employs friction and flooding as information censorship tools. Specifically, information friction prevents individuals from accessing undesirable information through technical hindrances like search filtering and throttling⁵, keyword blocking, or 404 denial of service attacks⁶. This tactic can redirect users away from sensitive information towards state-approved or preferred narratives. The pros of information friction include its subtlety and effectiveness in reducing the visibility of unwanted content without overtly appearing repressive. It helps maintain a semblance of openness while controlling the flow of information. However, the cons are that savvy internet users might find ways to circumvent these barriers, potentially leading to the spread of alternative methods to access restricted information.

Oppositely, information flooding promotes information that aligns with the state's preferred narrative in two ways: 1) flooding information directly to the public; and 2) flooding the media. The first way is when a hashtag, originally intended to criticise a government policy, is applied to pro-government propaganda or irrelevant content, the hashtag is flooded with pro-government sites, comments, and information, burying the negative, anti-government criticism. Another example of flooding is when controversial news stories are pushed deeper into pages of media or Internet search results by pro-government or irrelevant content. This tactic is a major theme in Roberts' work, as it highlights how the CCP strategically uses these mechanisms to manage public

⁵ One typical example is the well-known China's Great Firewall which is not an impenetrable digital barrier. Instead, it can be jumped or avoided by technologies and user practices, like VPNs, but with some extra time or costs.

⁶ 404 is a status code that tells a web user that a requested page is not available, but normally informs as technologic problems rather than telling web users they are political problems.

perception and maintain control over the narrative. By creating a constant stream of state-favoured information and making it difficult to access dissenting views, the government effectively distracts the population from contentious issues, ensuring that public focus remains aligned with the party's objectives. It also complements King et al.'s observations on the government's efforts to use 50 Cent Army posts to distract the public's attention from contentious issues or overshadowing critical voices or any information unfavourable to the CCP's agenda. The pros of information flooding include its ability to drown out dissenting voices and control the narrative by overwhelming the public with state-approved content. It can effectively dilute the impact of criticism and create an environment where alternative viewpoints are hard to find. The cons, however, include the potential for public scepticism if the flooding is too obvious, leading to a loss of credibility for state-approved content.

In particular, the effectiveness and costlessness of flooding as a censorship tool, as Roberts suggests, is enhanced by the digital age, where the sheer volume of information allows the government to obscure dissenting views behind a deluge of supportive or neutral content. Moreover, this approach enables the state to maintain a façade of openness while controlling the narrative, a strategy that Roberts states has been underexplored in censorship literature.

All these studies discussed above shed light on the intricate mechanisms of media censorship in China, and offer a comprehensive view of how the state has adapted its censorship and information control strategies to the challenges and opportunities presented by the internet and social media. This adaptation involves a balance between restricting access to sensitive content and inundating the public with narratives that support the state's agenda.

At the same time, these studies also raise important considerations for media practitioners, particularly regarding the impact of censorship on media practitioners' practices, as well as their media content production, dissemination and consumption. Roberts' analysis of digital censorship, particularly the impact on information-seeking behaviour and the role of fear in stimulating curiosity by creating a sense of forbidden knowledge that might increase people's desire to seek out that information (Wilson, 2024)), underscores the need for media practitioners to navigate these controls

carefully. This discussion prompts a broader examination of how media practitioners produce content within tightly regulated environments.

Since Roberts' analysis provides crucial insights into the state's strategies of censorship, she relies mainly on secondary data, such as government reports, existing studies, and public records, to construct her analysis of censorship tactics. While this approach allows for a comprehensive overview, it also means that certain aspects, like the practical implementation and nuanced impacts of flooding, may not be as deeply explored. Further investigation could involve primary data collection, such as interviews with media practitioners, surveys of internet users, or direct observation of online censorship practices. This would provide more detailed insights into how flooding is experienced on the ground and its effectiveness in shaping public discourse. Additionally, examining case studies of specific incidents where flooding was employed could illustrate its impact on public opinion and information dissemination in more concrete terms.

From this point, this project can fill the gap by presenting a case study on We-media practitioners in China, who operate at the intersection of state control and the burgeoning space of digital media. Through studying this group of We-media practitioners by directly interviewing them, this study can offer first-hand insights into the following questions:

- 1). How do We-media practitioners adapt their content strategies in response to the pervasive censorship environment and the state's flooding mechanism?
- 2). How does the political censorship influence the We-media content production process, including self-censorship practices and their innovative approaches to circumvent restrictions?

By focusing on We-media practitioners, the study can illuminate how these individuals and organisations contribute to the diversity of the media landscape in China, despite the constraints of state censorship. It can also explore how they respond to the state's flooding strategy, whether by carving out niches for alternative narratives or by finding subtle ways to participate in broader public discourses.

2.2.3 Media survival: Media resistance, journalism practices, and media-state relations

The second pillar of this framework revolves around the survival of media, primarily influenced by the interplay among state control, economic imperatives, and journalistic innovation. This interplay is characterised by three main aspects. The first aspect focuses on the economic sustainability of media content generation, encompassing production, distribution, and consumption within the context of applying the propaganda model in China. The second aspect is concerned with media practitioners themselves and their negotiation of journalistic integrity against state censorship. The final aspect examines how media professionals are leveraging digital opportunities to advance their work.

a) The Propaganda Model's Application

In China, media content generation is closely monitored by the state, which defines what is permissible in news reporting and content creation. Despite these constraints, Chinese media endeavour to develop content that captures the interest of their audiences, carefully balancing political obedience and maintaining economic sustainability.

From this perspective, Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model (PM), with its focus on size, ownership, advertising reliance, sourcing, and ideological control, offers valuable insights into the Chinese media landscape. Specifically, they propose that media content can serve the interests of elite groups mainly through five filters: 1) size, wealth and ownership of media firms; 2) advertising as primary income source; 3) reliance on official sources; 4) flak as a mechanism of social control; and 5) anti-communism as a control mechanism (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, 2010; Mullen & Klaehn, 2010).

In general, this PM model addresses that large media organisations are often part of bigger conglomerates owned by wealthy individuals or corporations, leading to content that aligns with the interests of these owners. They rely on advertising revenue as their

primary income source, which creates a conflict of interest that media content might be skewed towards pleasing advertisers rather than serving public interest. Besides that, their media products often depend on information from government, business and 'experts', leading to a potential bias due to their official perspectives. In this context, Flak refers to negative responses to a media statement or program, which can come from powerful groups and be used to discipline and control the media.

To understand the last element, Herman & Chomsky identified "anti-communism as a control mechanism". It is necessary to note that at the time when Herman and Chomsky started to build the propaganda model in the late 20th century, anti-communism served as a national ideology at that time in the United States, framing the way stories were reported and what was considered "newsworthy" (Mullen & Klaehn, 2010). McChesney (1989) summarised that this filter was a critical element of Western political culture during the Cold War, providing what he termed the "ideological oxygen" for the vigorous operation of the propaganda model (p.8). This ideological bias, as identified by the filter, involves the marginalisation of dissenting voices or perspectives that simply differ from the prevailing elite narrative (Pedro, 2011). Thus, further studies by de Burgh (2018) and Rausch (2016) conclude that this element comprises dominant ideological forces, which can be strategically deployed and modified to serve elite interests when necessary.

Since its publication, the PM remains a significant tool for understanding systemic biases in media, particularly in relation to its economic structure and the influence of powerful elites. Numerous scholars have presented evidence in support of the central hypotheses of this model and its application in other countries. For example, researchers like Boyd-Barrett (2004), Klaehn (2005), and Phillips (2007) explore the utility of the propaganda model in examining media systems worldwide and have also noted the tendency of media to serve elite preferences and propagate narratives that align with those interests. However, most of their studies focus on the democratic regimes, where media is often perceived as independent.

In recent years, the application of the Propaganda Model has been extended to examine media dynamics within authoritarian regimes, offering fresh insights into the intricate relationship between media and state power. A notable contribution to this

area of research comes from Hearn-Branaman (2014), who applied the PM's five filters to analyse the media environment in China, and reveals that Herman and Chomsky's PM remains an effective tool in comparative media research in different settings. Within the context of China, it shed new light on the understanding of how media operates under authoritarian conditions, enhancing our understanding of the complex interplay between media practices and state governance.

According to these five filters of PM, despite the media in China also reflecting elite views and being influenced by ownership structures in many ways, the nature of these elites differs from those in the Western media, particularly the United States, with Chinese media being primarily state controlled as opposed to private conglomerate control in the West. While media in both regions lean on elite sources, the underlying forces in China are more tightly interwoven with political structures rather than market dynamics. One important difference is that the concept of flak in the Chinese context is less about external criticism and more about internal political pressures as media control strategy.

But there are some similarities in the last filter dominant ideologies between the United States and China, with both systems promoting market mechanisms and nationalism, albeit through different elite structures and legitimisation strategies. One important difference, as Hearn-Branaman (2014) argues, is that media in the original PM focuses on manufacturing consent for the status quo, while the Chinese media aims at manufacturing harmony, in line with the state's focus on maintaining social harmony and stability.

However, this evident change originates from the power transition from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping. Under China's previous leader, Hu Jintao, state policy was focused on "creating a harmonious society" (Zheng & Tok, 2007). This policy fitted into the theoretical statement that media in China serves as a tool for producing the social harmony. However, in terms of today's China, the role of media has shifted significantly, given that Xi's governance emphasises nationalism, party loyalty, and the "Chinese Dream", often pursued through more assertive and aggressive policies compared to his predecessor (Economy, 2018). His ideological focus diverges from the previous emphasis on harmony, instead highlighting a stronger, more centralised state with

media serving to reinforce these nationalistic and ideological themes. Thus, the model developed by Hearn-Brannaman might need to adapt to these specific political and ideological shifts under the current leadership.

Thus, despite such developments in past decades, the fundamental dynamics of media control and propaganda, as outlined in the PM, remain relevant. This application of PM in China is a significant instance concerned with exploring the interplay between economic, political and the media in an authoritarian regime. It extends this model to understand how censorship (through flak and ideological control) and economic incentives (influenced by advertising and ownership) are used for political control in media in China. The five filters listed by this model could fit into the context of media in current China, as this model focuses on the economic factors in the controlling media, which might be even more evident in China. Compared with Western neoliberal economies, Chinese economy has shown a highly interventionistic character. The state has heavily intervened in the market in the course of economic reform and development. As a consequence, the market is no longer independent from the state power, but attached to the state power. Thus, for the state, economic factors would inevitably serve as measures to control the media.

However, this model has been critiqued for its “market-centric view” and lack of the influence of “journalistic professionalism” in shaping media content and practices (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). This oversight is particularly glaring in discussions about media in China, where the interplay between state control and market forces presents a unique context that challenges conventional media models. As highlighted by Ma (2005) and Pan (2000), the dual pressure from state and market forces in China creates a unique environment that destabilises media practices. This scenario forces media practitioners to navigate through contradictions by improvising, which has been overlooked by the PM. From this point of view, the detailed journalistic practices of media practitioners will be discussed in the next section.

b) Journalistic Negotiation with State Censorship

In the field of media studies on journalistic negotiation in the authoritarian regimes, extensive scholarly attention has been dedicated to the dynamics of activism and state dissent. Many studies have simplified the journalistic practices in China as a “cat and

mouse game” (Yang, 2014). The cat and mouse game metaphor vividly portrays an adversarial relationship between the state (cat) and journalists or dissenters (mouse). It emphasises the dynamic of pursuit and evasion, where the state (the cat) seeks to control, censor, or punish journalists or dissenters (the mice) who, in turn, try to evade these controls. It emphasises a “pursuit-and-evasion” dynamic, where journalists creatively circumvent state censorship, and the state continually updates its strategies to catch up, highlighting an ongoing battle of strategies between the two.

Contrastingly, He's (2008) metaphor of "dancing with shackles" offers a nuanced perspective on journalistic resilience in China. It acknowledges the severe constraints journalists face yet celebrates their ability to "dance" or perform their duties within these bounds. The metaphor of "shackles" vividly captures the political control and restriction over the media. He further posits that media commercialisation in China has paradoxically opened up some spaces for journalistic practice and dissent (Shirk, 2011). This means that the drive for profit and audience engagement in the market has led commercial media to explore topics or investigative angles that might not strictly adhere to the official narrative, thereby creating pockets of relative freedom and opportunities for more diverse reporting.

The dichotomous views represented by metaphors like the cat and mouse game and dancing with shackles have indeed provided valuable insights into the dynamics between the state and media practitioners in China. However, these two views have limited the understanding of the complexities of media practices in authoritarian regimes by oversimplifying media-state relations and interactions into purely oppositional terms. The work of Repnikova (2017, 2018) fills the gap between the two extremes of control versus resistance by exposing the complexity of the relationship between media practitioners and the authoritarian state, particularly in China and Russia.

In her book *Media politics in China: Improvising power under authoritarianism* (2017), Repnikova challenges the notion of journalists as mere dissenters, positioning them as mediators and within-the-system activists. Specifically, she introduces the concept of “guarded improvisation”, which refers to the strategic approach which journalists and state officials in China use to navigate the complex, often fluid and ambiguous

boundaries set by the party-state. This concept involves a delicate balancing act where journalists must adhere to the constraints imposed by the state while finding subtle ways to push the boundaries of permissible reporting. This concept recognises that journalists in China are not just passive recipients of state directives or outright opposition figures but are actively engaged in shaping and negotiating the media landscape. It broadens the understanding of journalistic agency in restrictive political environments like China, showing that Chinese journalists can exert influence and contribute to societal discourse despite heavy censorship and control.

One significant factor regarding Repnikova's concept of "guarded improvisation" is that it involves understanding and interpreting the unwritten rules and ambiguous state directives. Journalists in China must develop a keen sense of how far they can go in their reporting — identifying the boundaries of state tolerance for critical discourse and finding creative ways to address sensitive issues without crossing red lines. These strategies, as Repnikova identifies, are hidden within the ambiguities of state directives and "unwritten rules". From this perspective, she explores how Chinese journalists use various strategies to operate within the system while advocating for change and contributing to public discourse, including, for example, exploiting vague and inconsistent censorship rules to publish investigative reports and critical stories without directly challenging state authority. They also form alliances with reform-minded officials and intellectuals, which provide protection and leverage for more critical reporting. The framing and timing of stories are also crucial; journalists align critical stories with official rhetoric or release them during periods of political relaxation to increase their acceptance and impact. Additionally, digital platforms offer new avenues for disseminating information, providing more space for improvisation and rapid dissemination of news before censorship can occur.

At the heart of guarded improvisation is the concept of risk management. Media practitioners, especially journalists and media professionals, must constantly and carefully weigh the potential impact of their actions of reporting, balancing the need for critical journalism with the imperative of avoiding censorship or punishment. This delicate balancing approach provides valuable insights into the complexities of journalistic negotiation with state censorship in an authoritarian context.

c) Embracing Digital Opportunities

The digital revolution has introduced a new era for media survival, presenting both challenges and opportunities for journalistic practices. In recent years, many studies have underscored the adaptability and resilience of media practitioners in the face of digital transformation and the evolving media landscape, framing their work mainly within two themes. The first one focuses on the economic opportunities provided from the digital technologies for journalism, and the challenges to traditional media systems (Hassid & Repnikova, 2016; K. Li, 2018; Van der Haak et al., 2012). The second theme is more from the aspect of online activists and how digital technologies empower the journalists to do investigative journalism and political reporting (Fu & Lee, 2016; Nip & Fu, 2016; Tong, 2015).

The collaborative work of Hassid and Repnikova (2016) studies the reasons for Chinese professional journalists embracing the internet for journalistic practices. They find that there are three main reasons. Firstly, the internet offers journalists more economic opportunities, despite the rise of digital media challenging the traditional media in terms of financial gains. Individual journalists can, for example, adopt the internet and develop their content on digital media to attract the attention of wider audiences. Secondly, the digital era increases the importance of journalistic professionalism, which highlights the opportunities for professional media practitioners, and they are valued for their ability to deliver accurate and ethical reporting, in ensuring the reliability of information in an age of widespread misinformation. Lastly, the internet opens up more room for journalists who are interested in investigative journalism. It not only offers journalists access to a wealth of information and data that can be crucial for investigative reporting, but it also provides digital tools, online platforms such as social media and messaging apps, allowing them to build networks with colleagues, sources, and experts across geographical boundaries. These networks can facilitate the sharing of information, ideas, and strategies for navigating censorship, thereby enhancing the scope and depth of political reporting, especially in tightly controlled environments like China. Thus, while the internet is not immune to censorship, it does offer the media practitioners in the authoritarian context creative ways to circumvent restrictions and state censorship.

The evolution of the internet and digital media also brings into focus the PM model. In the updated 2010 editions of *Manufacturing Content*, Herman and Chomsky (2010) extend their work, particularly with the rise of digital media and the Internet. They argue that “the Internet and the new communications technologies are breaking the corporate stranglehold on journalism and opening an unprecedented era of interactive democratic media” (p.xv). Regarding the five filters: 1) size, wealth and ownership of media firms; 2) advertising as primary income source; 3) reliance on official sources; 4) flak as a mechanism of social control; and 5) anti-communism as a control mechanism, the rise of the internet has strengthened their importance, rather than diminished them. In particular, ownership, the first filter, has become more concentrated since the original model, with the rise of the internet giants. Advertising, the second filter, has gained more importance with the increasing commercialisation of new digital media and global media (Fuchs, 2018). Sourcing continues to be dominated by corporate and government bodies. Flak remains an effective tool for elites and authorities to discipline the media (Winter, 2007), while the ideology of anti-communism, the last filter, has been largely replaced by the ideology of the market (Mullen & Klaehn, 2010).

Yet, the rise of digital platforms paradoxically reinforces the PM's five filters. However, not much work has been done to apply the updated PM to digital China, despite the current Chinese state under Xi Jinping's governance playing a more direct and dominant role in controlling and influencing media, especially the digital media landscape. With the rise of digital media and the internet, the Chinese government has developed sophisticated methods of online censorship and control, such as the Great Firewall, big data analysis. While the PM provides a robust framework for understanding media survival, its application to China's current media landscape requires further modification to account for the specificities of state control and digital surveillance.

2.3 The Strategic Diversification (SD) Model: An Original Framework

Following the theoretical and methodological discussions in the preceding sections. An original theoretical framework that of the Strategic Diversification (SD) Model is introduced in this research. This framework is developed to address critical gaps in the literature particularly on media survival in China's socio-political system. In this

system, the rise of digital media and advancements in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have empowered media content creators to produce and disseminate information independently, fostering a dynamic and highly competitive digital environment. However, strict government censorship and platform-specific regulations, typical of authoritarian contexts present significant challenges (Fuchs, 2010; Repnikova, 2017; Stockmann, 2013). In response, media practitioners not least in We-media employ adaptive strategies to balance creativity with compliance, striving for both editorial autonomy and economic viability. The SD Model focuses on these strategies, illustrating how We-media practitioners in China exemplify a new form of media survival under authoritarian rule.

As outlined earlier in this chapter, the broader framework of state control and media survival examines mechanisms of political control such as censorship, propaganda, and ideological dominance, as well as their impact on media content production (Brady, 2017a; Esarey & Xiao, 2011; King et al., 2013; Repnikova, 2017). Traditional approaches often emphasise the unidirectional imposition of state control, portraying media survival as either a consequence of state leniency or passive compliance by practitioners. In this regard, the SD Model challenges this view and reframes media survival by introducing a more dynamic and agency-focused perspective. It argues that media survival is not merely a result of state tolerance or practitioners' passivity but is shaped by the strategic efforts of practitioners to creatively adapt to and navigate restrictive environments. It showcases how practitioners adopt strategic and innovative measures to navigate restrictions while maintaining their operational, creative, and financial viability.

In particular, the SD Model builds on the political economy of media framework, extending its application to authoritarian settings. For instance, Hallin and Mancini's media systems approach, while primarily developed for Western media systems, this approach's focus on state involvement in media content offers a comparative base. However, it is limited in its applicability to authoritarian settings where media operates under direct state control rather than indirect influence (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The SD Model addresses this gap by examining adaptive strategies that media employ under rigid state control, providing a unique lens for understanding media survival in

authoritarian regimes like China. As discussed shortly, in the SD model, strategies such as adaptive content creation, audience identification, and risk mitigation are often deployed by We-media practitioners. These strategies are formed subtly within the dynamics between Chinese state stimulation and controlling policies towards media, and the interests of We-media practitioners.

Besides, although the PM from Herman and Chomsky (2010) emphasises how economic and political elites shape media content to reinforce the status quo, primarily in capitalist democracies, it does not fully address the agency of media practitioners, particularly their capacity to innovate or adapt under authoritarian rule. The SD Model expands on this perspective by introducing mechanisms that allow media practitioners to strategically manage elite influence, circumvent or comply with direct state control, and dynamically respond to political pressures and economic imperatives in creative and survival-focused ways.

By and large, the SD Model diverges from traditional frameworks by centring on agency within constrained environments, highlighting the proactive choices that We-media practitioners make to balance economic survival with political compliance. It rejects the conventional views which perceives the role of media *vis-à-vis* state is complete passive in authoritarian regimes, but showing We-media practitioners and their strategies in China is adaptive to conform with their private interests and state expectation. This adaptation-oriented approach adds a new layer to the political economy of media by focusing on the strategic actions of media practitioners within a restrictive regulatory landscape. The following sections introduce the key components of the SD Model.

2.3.1 Three Core Components of the SD Model

The SD Model is grounded in three foundational principles essential to We-media content strategies in China: adaptive content creation, audience identification, and risk mitigation. These principles are interconnected, working together to form the bedrock logic of the SD model.

The first component, adaptive content creation, involves tailoring content to meet the preferences of diverse audience segments while adhering to state-imposed guidelines.

In authoritarian contexts like China, where media content is closely monitored and regulated, practitioners employ creative techniques to avoid direct confrontation with censorship mechanisms (Hassid & Repnikova, 2016; Repnikova, 2017). For instance, the use of indirect language, humour, or metaphors to approach sensitive topics creatively without breaching censorship rules (Yang, 2009; deLisle, Goldstein, & Yang, 2016). This strategy aligns with existing literature on media control in authoritarian systems, which highlights how practitioners innovate to navigate restrictions (e.g., Esarey & Xiao, 2011; He, 2008). However, the SD Model extends these insights by framing adaptive content creation not only as a survival mechanism but also as a dual-purpose strategy, balancing compliance with profitability. By emphasising the economic role of adaptive content creation, the SD Model addresses a critical gap, showing how practitioners use innovation not just for survival but for long-term viability in competitive digital markets.

Audience identification serves as the second core component, focusing on the importance of understanding and segmenting audience to enhance content relevance and market reach. Practitioners rely on tools such as surveys, analytics, and direct engagement to collect data and gather insights into audience demographics, preferences and behaviour. These insights allow for more specialised content that meets the expectations of different audience segments while broadening advertising opportunities (Napoli, 2011). This component builds on theories of audience commodification in the political economy of media (Mosco, 2009), but innovates by showing how these strategies operate under dual pressures of state control and market forces in authoritarian contexts. By combining audience insights with adaptive content creation, We-media practitioners balance the competing demands of political compliance and economic sustainability.

The third component, risk mitigation, highlights the needs of We-media practitioners to adopt diversification strategies aimed at reducing reliance on any single platform or revenue stream. In China's digital ecosystem where platforms often impose additional restrictions beyond state regulations (Ruan et al., 2016; Yang, 2014), practitioners distribute content across multiple platforms and accounts to avoid overdependence on any one platform (Jiang, 2010). This multi-platform approach ensures resilience against censorship and platform-specific bans or regulatory crackdowns.

Thus, the SD Model integrates these three interconnected components - adaptive content creation, audience identification, and risk mitigation - to explain how We-media practitioners sustain operations in authoritarian contexts. Adaptive content creation ensures compliance with state regulations while maximising audience engagement, and audience identification refines content strategies to cater to diverse segments, enhancing relevance and monetisation opportunities. Risk mitigation reduces reliance on single platforms or revenue streams, ensuring resilience against disruptions.

Moreover, the three components of the SD model coalesce into three overarching strategies practically adopted by We-media practitioners: employing multiple accounts, delivering content on multiple platforms, and practising content washing as a cost-effective strategy for content creation. Together, these strategies enable practitioners to balance compliance with innovation, ensuring operational sustainability and economic viability.

2.3.2 Three Practical Strategies Derived from the SD Model

The first strategy, multiple accounts, involves maintaining several accounts across platforms to mitigate risks associated with platform-specific censorship or account suspension. By decentralising their content distribution, practitioners reduce reliance on any single point of failure, ensuring continuity in the face of unpredictable regulatory or platform enforcement actions (Esarey & Xiao, 2011). This strategy reflects broader trends in digital media adaptation under authoritarian regimes, where resilience is prioritised.

Multi-platform distribution complements this by extending content delivery across various platforms. This approach not only broadens audience reach but also diversifies practitioners' presence, making them less vulnerable to platform-specific restrictions or algorithmic changes. For instance, it ensures that if one platform faces restrictions, other channels can still reach audiences, thus preserving the media's commercial viability and audience engagement. The strategy aligns with research on media survival in competitive and regulated digital ecosystems, where adaptability is key to maintaining audience engagement (Napoli, 2011).

The third strategy, content washing, ensures compliance across all accounts and platforms, enabling practitioners to maintain a consistent and cost-effective approach to content creation. Meantime, by standardising content for distribution across multiple accounts and platforms, and modifying sensitive content to align with regulatory requirements—allow practitioners to maintain a degree of operational flexibility and minimise the chances of censorship. This approach combines with the above two strategies highlights how innovation can meet regulatory requirements without compromising creativity (Yang, 2009; Jiang, 2010; deLisle, Goldstein, & Yang, 2016).

These strategies are inherently interconnected. Multiple accounts and multi-platform distribution create a distributed network that reduces risks from censorship while maximising audience access. Content washing, in turn, ensures consistency and efficiency across these networks, unifying efforts to navigate compliance challenges. Together, these strategies address the dual pressures of state control and market competition. By reducing operational risks and expanding economic opportunities, they form a comprehensive response to the realities of authoritarian digital media environments. The SD Model, thus, illustrates how We-media practitioners exemplify a balance of compliance, creativity, and commercial acumen, providing valuable insights into media survival under authoritarian constraints.

Conclusion: Applying the Political Economy of Media Framework to We-Media in Digital China under Xi Jinping

In the era of Xi Jinping, the rise of We-media exemplifies the dynamic forces at play in China's digital landscape. This framework's observation of state control and media survival through the lens of the political economy of media offers a comprehensive approach for understanding the complex interplay of forces shaping media development in China. This approach allows for a nuanced analysis that captures the complexity of We-media's development amidst China's unique socio-economic and political context. It provides tools to analyse not just the media content and industry practices but also how these are influenced by and contribute to larger economic structures and political relations.

Firstly, this framework illustrates the economic underpinnings of We-media. The digital economy's expansion, characterised by increased social media platforms and mobile internet access, has provided fertile ground for We-media's growth. Economic incentives for content creation, monetisation opportunities through advertising, and the pursuit of market share in the digital sphere are key drivers. However, these economic dynamics cannot be isolated from the overarching influence of state control and political considerations in the context of China.

Secondly, the role of state political power in shaping We-media's landscape is profound. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the Chinese government has increased its political control in the digital realm, implementing restrictive regulations and censorship of online content, enhancing surveillance mechanisms, and promoting narratives that align with state interests. This political control manifests not only in direct censorship but also in subtler forms, combining with the economic control over the digital market. This political economy framework helps dissect how state policies and political objectives shape We-media's growth, influencing the processes of We-media content production, dissemination and consumption. Thus, it facilitates a holistic discussion on the interaction between economic forces and political power in shaping the development of We-media in China. By examining the economic motivations behind We-media, the influence of state political power, and the interaction between these forces, we can appreciate the complexity of China's digital media landscape. This approach not only sheds light on the current state of We-media but also provides insights into its future trajectory, as economic incentives continue to collide and coalesce with the imperatives of political authority.

Building on the theoretical lens of the political economy of media, this research introduces the SD Model, which can serve as a cornerstone for understanding the survival strategies of We-media practitioners under China's authoritarian system. By integrating three core components: adaptive content creation, audience identification, and risk mitigation, the SD Model provides a nuanced framework that highlights the agency of practitioners in navigating dual pressures of state control and market demands. These components translate into three practical strategies: maintaining multiple accounts, distributing content across multiple platforms, and practicing content washing to ensure compliance while optimising economic efficiency.

Collectively, these strategies exemplify how We-media practitioners balance creativity, compliance, and commercial acumen, ensuring operational sustainability and economic viability in a tightly regulated digital landscape.

In sum, the SD Model and the political economy of media framework together provide a comprehensive and nuanced perspective on We-media and its rise in China. They enable a holistic analysis of how economic incentives and political authority collide, coalesce, and shape the digital media landscape. By examining both the structural forces and the strategic agency of We-media practitioners, this approach illuminates the complexities of China's digital media environment and offers insights into its evolving trajectory.

Chapter 3: We-media in China: Media Commercialisation in China and the Rise of We-media

In the past four decades, the media landscape in reform China has undergone a transformative evolution. During the transition, We-media, has emerged as a distinctive and influential player challenging traditional media structures. As a new form of digital media, it has played a significant role in Chinese people's daily life.

To illustrate what We-media is, a prime example is Papi Jiang, one of China's popular We-media practitioners, focusing on creating comedic content on the internet. Since 2015, she began posting humorous short videos on multiple platforms like *Sina Weibo* (Xinlang weibo 新浪微博), *WeChat* (Weixin, 微信) and *Douyin* (TikTok's Chinese counterpart, 抖音) (Qin, 2016). Rather than addressing the political and social issues troubling contemporary China, her videos mainly offer critical-satirical commentaries on contemporary social issues among the younger generation in China, such as consumerism, gender norms, and family relations (Z. Huang, 2016; Qin, 2016; Weninger & Li, 2023). Her quirky humour, fast-paced editing style, and witty takes on modern Chinese society quickly attracted millions of views, and her followers on social media platforms skyrocketed. Meantime, by recognising the commercial potential of her growing popularity, in 2016, Papi established her own We-media brand, Papitube, and began monetising her content through various channels, for example, adding sponsorships and advertising into her videos and selling products directly to her audience via embedded e-commerce links (Li, 2019; Su, 2023).

Papi Jiang's story exemplifies We-media at its best. In this study, We-media refers to user-generated media based on the internet, comprising a diverse range of platforms, including *blogs*, *microblogs*, *live streaming*, and *short video services*, that enable individuals or small groups to publish, distribute, and monetise their content (Sun & Jiang, 2017). This medium merges technological advancements with individual creativity and commercial endeavours, forming a significant component of the digital media ecosystem. It empowers individuals to become influential content creators, and has revolutionised the way media information is created, shared and consumed.

Characterised by user-generated content and independent operation on digital platforms, We-media provides a vibrant space for individual expression and challenging the traditional dominance of state-controlled media. However, throughout its evolution, and amid strict government control and regulation, We-media in China has gradually shifted from merely serving as a medium for self-expression and public discourse to becoming a complex, commercially viable entity (Fang, 2022).

To better understand this shift, this chapter identifies three major forces driving this trend: media commercialisation, digital technological advancements, and regulatory controls. These forces have collectively influenced what We-media is, and how We-media content is created, distributed, and consumed within the country's changing media landscape. This chapter finds that this transformation began with China's opening and reform in the late 1970s. Since then, the CCP has started opening and economic reform, including the commercialisation of the media industry, which laid the foundation for the rise of We-media. Also, along with the media commercialisation, technological advancements provided the necessary tools for this adaptation. The widespread adoption of smartphones and the internet, coupled with advancements in digital payment systems and online advertising technologies, enabled an ecosystem where We-media could thrive. Meantime, the CCP has also adopted regulatory controls, which shaped the development of We-media.

This chapter contains three main sections. The first section discusses *what We-media is*. The section primarily elaborates on the definition of We-media in China, particularly its differentiation from citizen journalism and social media in the existing studies. The second section explores its emergence within the broader context of the changing media landscape in China, focusing on two main processes: media commercialisation and the development of digital technology. The final section examines the challenges that media commercialisation poses to the state, along with the government's efforts to control and regulate this rapidly changing media environment in the digital era.

3.1 What is We-media?

The term *We-media* is derived from the Chinese term “zi mei ti 自媒体”, which was initially introduced by Fang Xingdong, the founder of blogchina.com (now bokee.com) and chinalabs.com (a web research consultancy). Fang discussed the concept in several blog posts, drawing on ideas from Gillmor (2006) and the report by Bowman and Willis (2003) (Yu, 2017). Despite not updating his blog since 2015, his blog site continues to attract significant attention, with over 10 million clicks to date.

While the study of We-media has progressed in recent years, its definition remains inadequately explored in Chinese studies (Wu, 2014; Yu, 2017). Most existing studies rely on early definitions that fail to fully capture the current complexity and commercial aspects of We-media. Early discussions on We-media in the western contexts, such as those by Gillmor (2006) and Bowman and Willis (2003), focus on We-media’s role as a digitally empowered medium that allows individuals to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and share their thoughts, experiences, and observations globally. As Bowman and Willis (2003) describe: “We-Media is a way to begin to understand how ordinary citizens, empowered by digital technologies that connect knowledge globally, are contributing to and participating in their own truths, their own kind of news” (p5). From this perspective, We-media primarily serves as a platform for self-expression and public discourse, while also acting as a watchdog by highlighting societal issues and providing alternative perspectives that are often absent from mainstream media.

3.1.1 We-media in the Liberal Democracies

The idea of We-media in the West is closely linked with the principles of “citizen journalism”, also known as “grassroots journalism” (Allan & Hintz, 2019, p. 18; Gillmor, 2006; Spangenberg & Heise, 2014). These concepts share a common theme, generally referring to ordinary individuals or non-professional journalists who play an active role in collecting, reporting, and disseminating news and information (Atton, 2009; Gillmor, 2006; Min, 2016). For example, Radsch (2013) defines citizen journalism as “an alternative and activist form of news gathering and reporting” that operates outside mainstream media. Citizen journalism represents a specific form of both citizen media and user-generated content (UGC). The term “*citizen*”, suggests civic-mindedness and social responsibility, with “journalism” denoting professional practice. From this point, the notion of We-media in Gillmor’s work aligns seamlessly

with the principles of citizen journalism. The term “We” in We-media also implies a civic responsibility to report and share information, emphasising the idea of collaboration among ordinary individuals who participate in content creation (Gillmor, 2006, p. 18). Both of these two concepts promote public participation, grassroots expression, and a challenge to traditional media structures, providing alternative perspectives and democratising the flow of information. Particularly, the concepts of citizen journalism and We-media gained prominence with the rise of digital media and user-generated content (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Min, 2016; Pan, 2011). Digital media technology like blogs, social media platforms, video-sharing sites and other digital tools, along with the increasing prevalence of smartphones, have made them more accessible to people worldwide (Gillmor, 2006; Spangenberg & Heise, 2014).

3.1.2 We-media in China

However, We-media in China has developed in a different context, which has evolved significantly, both technologically and commercially. As will be discussed in the later sections, the emergence of We-media explicitly experienced two stages: initially, it was a grassroots movement focused on personal expression, while later it evolved into a formidable commercial force in China’s cyberspace, transforming into a comprehensive digital empire. In the first stage, the concept of We-media is similar to the idea of citizen journalism. However, the second stage shows a process of commercialisation of We-media, enabling creators to monetise their UGC through advertising, sponsored content, and e-commerce. Moreover, during the development of We-media, the Chinese government has also played a significant role in shaping its growth while developing strategies to control it.

The conflation of We-media with social media is a critical issue in many Chinese studies. Some scholars, such as Sun and Jiang (2017), define We-media simply as “any self-posted content on social media platforms and everyone who is active on social media”. This definition is problematic as it conflates We-media with social media, blurring the distinctions between the two. In some Chinese literature, the terms “We-media” and “social media” are used interchangeably, which further blurs the boundary between the two concepts (see for example, Dai, 2011; Zhang, 2008; Zhou, 2011). Equating We-media with social media platforms oversimplifies its role

and impact within the Chinese media ecosystem. Although social media platforms are a critical component of the We-media ecosystem and they both belong to digital media⁷, they do not encompass its entirety.

Wu (2014) clarifies the relationship between We-media and social media, noting that We-media represents a new form of digital commercial media rooted in social media platforms. This view points out We-media's dependency on social media as the latter provides the necessary infrastructure that supports We-media's content creation, distribution and audience engagement (Sloan & Quan-haase, p. 17; Liu, 2017; Zhang, 2019), making them vital for We-media's commercial success. For example, We-media shares the built-in social networks and algorithms of social media platforms to reach and expand its audience (Li, 2021). The social aspect of these platforms enables We-media content to be shared, liked, and commented on, amplifying its reach and impact.

The commercial aspects of We-media also raise important considerations. WiC (2018) and Zhang (2019) identify that, unlike ordinary social media users who utilise social media platforms for personal objectives, those operating accounts either as individuals or small entities with commercial goals are categorised under We-media (WiC, 2018; Zhang, 2019). With a drive for profitability, their content, meticulously curated and structured, often provides a source of livelihood as full-time careers (Verberg & Koetse, 2019). This commercial focus distinguishes it significantly from the citizen journalism-styled We-media in the West, which was not initially intended for commercial purposes but rather as a democratic extension of media power to the public, fostering a platform for grassroots self-expression and public discourse. Moreover, those engaged in citizen journalism are often activists, motivated by the desire to give a voice to marginalised communities and foster grassroots activism (Deutsch Karlekar & Radsch, 2012).

⁷ Digital media refers to any media content that is encoded in a machine-readable format. Digital media can include text, audio, video, and graphics that are transmitted over the internet or computer networks. This encompasses a broad range of technology-based media platforms and content, including television, radio, the internet, and mobile phones. Essentially, digital media is a broad category that includes both social media and We-media as subcategories, each utilising digital technologies to disseminate content.

Thus, the significant difference between We-media and social media lies in their distinct focus. Although both social media and We-media belong to specific types of digital media and the operations of each are fundamentally reliant on user-generated content (UGC), their core purposes diverge significantly. The core of We-media lies in its ability to enable ordinary users to create, disseminate and monetise their content directly to audiences without the intermediary of established media organisations. Social media, on the other hand, prioritises social interaction and networking. Platforms like *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Twitter*, and *LinkedIn* are designed to support a wide range of social interactions, allowing users to interact, create, share, and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. Despite these platforms also hosting UGC, the primary purpose is to foster connections and communication rather than content dissemination.

Overall, We-media, citizen journalism, and social media each play unique roles in the digital landscape, complementing and overlapping with each other while providing new opportunities and challenges for content creators and consumers alike (see *the comparative table 3.1*). In this study, We-media refers to user-generated media based on the internet, comprising a diverse range of UGC platforms, including blogs, microblogs, live streaming, and short video services, that enable individuals or small groups to publish, distribute, and monetise their content. It is a distinct form of journalism that goes beyond typical social media usage by focusing on content creation and dissemination. It also aims at potential monetisation through various means, such as advertising, sponsored content, and direct sales, and facilitates a wide range of content types, including texts, pictures, and video content.

Aspect	We-media	Citizen Journalism	Social Media
Definition	User-generated media on digital platforms focusing on content creation, distribution, and monetisation.	An alternative and activist form of news gathering and reporting	Digital platforms designed for social networking and sharing user-generated content.
Content Creators	Individuals or small groups (often commercial)	Ordinary individuals (often non-professional)	Individuals and organisations (mixed professional and non-professional)
Primary Focus and Purpose	Commercially driven content creation and distribution, personal branding	Providing alternative news and perspectives, often addressing overlooked social issues, Civic engagement, watchdog journalism	Social interaction, networking, and communication
Types of Content	Text posts, images, videos, stories, live streams on social media platforms like blogs, microblogs.	Text posts, images, videos, stories, live streams on social media platforms like blogs, microblogs.	Text posts, images, videos, stories, live streams on social media platforms like blogs, microblogs.

Table 3.1: a comparative between We-media, citizen journalism, and social media.

However, We-media's growth is not without challenges. It operates within a complex framework where user autonomy often conflicts with commercial pressures and regulatory oversight. The content of We-media would be influenced by the imperatives of monetisation, such as advertising and sponsored content, which may prioritise profitability over content quality or ethical considerations. Moreover, in environments with stringent media controls, such as China, We-media faces additional layers of censorship, posing risks to freedom of expression and information dissemination. This medium, therefore, stands at the intersection of technological innovation, personal

expression, commercial interests, and regulatory dynamics, reflecting the contemporary struggles and opportunities of digital communication.

To better understand the development of We-media in China, including its emergence and transformation, it is necessary to explore it within the broader trajectory of media commercialisation and technological advancements in the country. The following section provides an overview of media commercialisation in China, tracing its evolution from a strict propaganda tool during Mao Zedong's era to a more diverse media ecosystem with a degree of commercial freedom, through the reform eras of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. It sets the stage for understanding how We-media is not merely a standalone phenomenon but rather emerged as a byproduct of significant shifts in China's media landscape driven by broader media commercialisation and technological evolution.

3.2 The Commercialisation of Chinese Media: From State Control to Growing Market Influence

The emergence and proliferation of We-media in China are deeply intertwined with the country's rapid economic reforms and technological advancements, a process that began under Deng Xiaoping and continued through subsequent leaderships. Deng's era, marked by the "Reform and Opening-Up" policy initiated in the late 1970s, set the stage for vast social and economic transformations that extended into the media landscape. These reforms unleashed a wave of market and technological forces that were crucial for the initial developments in China's internet and telecommunications sectors.

It is widely known that the CCP's approach to the role of the media in society has been significantly shaped by the ideas of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Marx and Engels viewed the media as an instrument of the ruling class, but they were both against censorship and supported it was essential to allow people to express disagreement towards the legislation of the Communist Party (Marx & Engels, 2019). In contrast, Lenin took a more absolutist position on media freedom and stated that the Party newspaper should be "a collective propagandist", "agitator", and "a collective organiser" (Lenin, 1935, p.

150). In the Mao era, the CCP more often leaned toward the Leninist view of the media (Chang, 1989). This approach also aligned with the Soviet-Communist model, as described in the study *Four Theories of the Press* (1956) by Siebert et al., where the government owns the media and uses it for its own ends. Thus, based on this instrumental ideology, a series of practices have been set to gain full control of the media.

Historically, the modern media landscape in China evolved significantly after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 under the leadership of Mao Zedong (1949-1976) (Zhang, 2007). During this period, media served primarily as a tool for disseminating the Party's ideology and controlling information flow within the country. After the founding of the PRC, the CCP, as the sole ruling party in Mainland China, took over all media outlets and broadcasting that were established under the Kuomintang (1911-1949). However, it did not initially monopolise journalism. A few independent commercial newspapers in major urban centres were retained and required to design their coverage to support the Party's guidance in political and social life. However, these private newspapers were cut from the news sources and their journalists were not allowed to do interview reports with Party and government officials. They were also unable to get much advertising. As a result, these privately-owned newspapers could not survive. Their numbers dropped from 58 in March 1950 to 25 in August 1951 and to zero in 1952 (Zhao, 1998, p. 57). Private commercial radio stations suffered a similar fate. In early 1950, there were 33, but by the end of 1953, they had all disappeared. In 1957, Mao Zedong stressed the crucial importance of the media and proposed the slogan "newspapers must be run by politicians" (Yao zhengzhijia ban bao 要政治家办报) (Bandurski, 2023), emphasising government ownership and censorship of the media. Moreover, the Party even imposed tight restrictions over all forms of media content, including news amount, content resources, length and format (He, 2000; Shirk, 2007). Thus, in Mao's era, the whole media system was completely subsidised by the state (Akhavan-Majid, 2004; Yan, 2000). The Chinese government was 'the owner, the manager and the practitioner' of the media (Chu, 1994, p. 8). However, under Mao, economic development was sidelined by the CCP's political agenda (Chu, 1986). During Mao's rule, the Chinese economy totally collapsed, with famine crises and high levels of social and political instability.

Against this backdrop, Mao's successor Deng Xiaoping started China's reform era, characterised by the economic reforms and opening-up policies, in order to rebuild China's economic system and restore Chinese people's faith in the Party (Chan, 1993; Gordon, 1997; Keller, 2003). These reforms, initiated in the late 1970s and early 1980s, transformed the Chinese media system dramatically. Under Deng's leadership, the CCP shifted away from Maoist class struggle and political campaigns in favour of a more pragmatic approach to economic development (Gordon, 1997; Naughton, 1993). The subsequent sections explore the changing media landscape during the economic and media reforms, leading to development of media commercialisation in modern China.

3.2.1 Economic Reforms and Introduction of Market Mechanisms

Media commercialisation in China, in general, refers to the process by which the media sector has gradually shifted from a strictly state-control media system, primarily serving propaganda purposes, to a more market-oriented entity influenced by principles of competition, profitability, and audience engagement. As identified by Stockmann (2013), this process showed the Chinese government's approach to "deregulate, commercialise and partially privatise" the Chinese media (pp. 7-9). This shift began with the economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, which marked a significant turning point for Chinese media's commercialisation.

Based on Deng's initiatives, there were three key changes in China's media landscape. The first was Deng's policies on decentralisation and diversification of media control. As mentioned above, prior to Deng's reforms, media in China was tightly controlled by the state, serving primarily as a vehicle for propaganda. Chinese media reform, along with the "opening up" economic policy, began as an attempt from the CCP to give up some of its monopoly over the provision of information to the public, in order to save the government money and help transform China into a modern economy (Huang, 2007; Shirk, 2011; Zhao, 1998). This decision was crucial in enabling the media to diversify and develop in directions that were not previously possible under tight state control. It also allowed greater flexibility for media institutions in content production and distribution, as well as provided greater authority to lower levels of administrative hierarchy in these media outlets to manage personnel and business decisions

autonomously (Stockmann, 2013). As a result, the media began to diversify, launching specialised magazines and TV channels catering to a variety of interests such as sports, fashion, and business.

The second significant change in this period was towards allowing advertising in media. As part of media reform, the government started to reduce direct financial support for many media institutions, pushing them towards finding their own sources of revenue through advertising and investments (Lynch, 1999; Shirk, 2011). In 1982, the Party officially ended the ban on advertising and allowed the licensing of advertising services (PRC, 1982). This means that businesses could officially register as entities that offer advertising services, further formalising and encouraging the growth of the advertising industry. This step was essential for creating a regulated and competitive advertising market, attracting investment, and further impacted the media commercialisation (Stockmann, 2013). Previously, in Mao's era, advertising in China had been highly restricted or banned outright (Zhao, 1998). By lifting this prohibition, the government opened doors for businesses and media outlets to engage in advertising activities (Hong, 1994).

These policies proved to be successful in mainly two ways. For the media outlets, the introduction of advertising revenue allowed them to generate their own income, reducing their reliance on government subsidies. Media companies started to adopt more market-oriented practices, focusing on advertising sales as key performance indicators, which inevitably influenced content production. For example, newspapers and television stations started to feature commercial advertisements, leading to a more varied and entertainment-focused content approach. Meanwhile, the government not only successfully reduced its media expenditures, but it also gained an added bonus from surplus advertising revenue from some popular newspapers and magazines (Zhao, 1998). These developments mark a critical period of transition for China's media and fundamentally changed the business model for many media institutions in China, which finally led to the rise of a market-oriented media (Akhavan-Majid, 2004).

The third significant transformation was in media ownership and operation models within the media industry by encouraging privatisation and stock market participation.

From the later 1990s, media enterprises began trading on the stock markets, attracting both state and private investments, including foreign capital (Akhavan-Majid, 2004; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011; Zhao, 2004). It was a significant shift for Chinese media from an entirely state-owned model that existed under Mao to a model that incorporates private ownership in media enterprises. With the introduction of private capital and mixed ownership, media organisations became motivated to operate more efficiently, and enjoyed encouragement for innovation in content creation, distribution methods and business models, as media enterprises sought to attract audiences and advertisers in a competitive market (Stockmann, 2013).

As a result, the rate of growth in the advertising industry has accelerated. In 1993, advertising revenue for the whole country reached 12.4 billion Chinese Yuan (CNY), a 98% increase from 1992. The sharp rise of advertising demands has also led to boom in all media sectors. In only four years, the numbers of radio and television stations increased from 724 and 543 in the year 1991 to 1201 and 837 in 1995, respectively. In 1978, at the beginning of media commercialisation, China had only 186 newspapers, all of which were completely subsidised by the state. By 1991, the number of registered newspapers in China was 1543, growing to 2039 by the end of 1993, and by the year 1995, this number reached 2200 (Zhao, 1998). This period marked the deepening of media commercialisation under subsequent leaderships, positioning China as one of the world's largest newspaper industries, with nearly 2,000 newspapers, 10,000 periodicals, hundreds of radio and television stations appearing for public consumption (BBC, 2013; C. Huang, 2016; Thomala, 2023). Moreover, China's media environment has become more internationalised. Along with the government's decision to open up China to the world, a wide cross-section of international news was presented each evening. China Central Television (CCTV) also contracted with several foreign broadcasters for entertainment programmes. For example, between 1982 and 1985, six United States television companies signed agreements to provide American programmes to China. This diversification was part of a broader strategy to become more appealing to advertisers by targeting more segmented markets (Chan, 1994).

In this regard, the era of Deng Xiaoping marked the beginning of media commercialisation in China. This period, underpinned by Deng's broader economic reforms and open-door policy, fundamentally altered the media landscape in China,

steering it towards a market-oriented approach characterised by decentralisation, commercial revenue through advertising, and privatisation. These changes helped transform Chinese media into a dynamic sector integrated with the global economy, fostering growth and innovation while reducing its dependence on direct government control.

Building on Deng's foundations, the subsequent leaderships of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao continued economic reforms and expansion of media reforms. The next section explores how the acceleration of technological advancements, including the internet and mobile devices, catalysed the emergence of We-media under the era of Jiang Zemin and later Hu Jintao. This development provided an unprecedented platform for the dissemination of information, democratising content production and distribution, leading to the rise of digital media.

3.3 Digital Infrastructure, Technological Advancements and the Impacts on the Emergence of We-Media

If we review the pathway of China's changing media landscape and We-media development, the governments from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao were strikingly important, as the internet infrastructure developed significantly during these periods, which laid the foundation for the prosperity of media and subsequently the emergence of We-media.

While Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao both prioritised technological development and understood its importance for China's future, their approaches differed in focus. Jiang emphasised foundational growth and opening up, while Hu focused more on leveraging this foundation to boost China's innovative capacities and tighten control over the burgeoning digital space. Collectively, driven by state politics from Jiang to Hu's periods, the late 1990s and early 2000s were a critical period for digital media in China, marked by significant strides in the adoption and spread of the internet, digital broadcasting and mobile technology. These advancements fundamentally altered how media content was produced, distributed, and consumed, paving the way for the emergence of We-media. This section first introduces some key policies on digital

infrastructure established by the CCP government under both Jiang and Hu's leadership and then discusses how they influenced the trajectory of China's digital media landscape, leading to the rise of digital media.

3.3.1 Early Stage of China's Digital Initiatives

Jiang Zemin articulated a clear and ambitious strategic vision for the internet's role in China's future, exemplified by a speech at an international computer conference in August 2000. Jiang underscored the significance of internet and information technology for China's future development, viewing it not just as technological progress but as an "engine" for China's economic development in the 21st century (X. Wang, 2005). This perspective was closely aligned with his goals of economic reform and global integration, particularly following China's entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001. In recognising the internet's transformative potential, Jiang's administration made significant efforts to expand China's digital infrastructure, laying the groundwork for its transition into a modern, information-driven economy.

During the early years of Jiang Zemin's leadership, the invention of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s had quickly positioned the internet as a transformative global phenomenon, reshaping the economic, social, and political landscape of the world. Although China started building its internet infrastructure as early as 1987, the Internet was not commercially available to the general public until 1995. However, soon after Jiang Zemin took in power, the Chinese government launched a series of important initiatives to openly embrace the internet revolution. The most significant effect was the launching of the "Golden Projects" to modernise China's information technology systems. This led to the Internet industry in China experiencing dramatic growth in the following few years, with a sharp rise in internet use and the netizen population, as well as a diversification of websites.

The "Golden Projects"

The Golden Projects is a key initiative of digital infrastructure development which has played a fundamental role in transforming China's information technology landscape and the commercialisation of media within the state. These projects were a series of key national information infrastructure projects initiated by the Chinese government in the 1990s under the leadership of Jiang Zemin and then further developed by Hu

Jintao. Among them, three main projects, *the Golden Bridge* (Jinqiao gongcheng 金桥工程), *Golden Card* (Jinka gongcheng 金卡工程), and *Golden Customs* (Jinguan gongcheng 金关工程), aimed at digitising China's information technology system across sectors such as telecommunications, broadcasting, and information services, in order to enhance the country's economic development and administrative efficiency⁸ (Linchuan & Hachigian, 2005).

In particular, the *Golden Bridge Project* stands as one of the most significant network projects in the history of China's internet development. Initiated by then Vice-Premier Zhu Rongji in March 1993, the project was designed to establish a national information and communication network. Its aim was to connect businesses and foster an online commercial network that spanned all provinces and major cities throughout the country. On 27 August of the same year, then Premier Li Peng approved the use of US\$3 million (approximately 17.4 million CNY) from the Premier's Reserve Fund to support the initial construction of the *Golden Bridge Project*. This investment was crucial for developing the necessary infrastructure to support the internet and other digital communication services across China. By August 1995, the *Golden Bridge Project* was preliminarily completed, establishing network connections (via satellite networks) across 24 provinces and cities, and achieving interconnectivity with international networks (Sina, 2012).

Following the government's call, in 1995, the first commercial provider, *ChinaNet* (China Telecom 中国公用计算机互联网) was introduced (Xing, 1997). The subsequent years saw a rapid expansion of construction of hardware infrastructure. By June 1998, another three national networks came into use, namely, *China Education and Research Network* (CERNET 中国教育和科研计算机网), *China Golden Bridge Net* (ChinaGBN 中国金桥信息网), and *China Science and Technology Network* (CSTNET 中国科技网), which form the "backbone" for the Chinese internet users (Dedrick; & Kraemer, 2001; Qi, 2000). Later, another six, *China Netcom* (CNCNet 中国电信),

⁸ More details can be found in Wang, C. (2003). *China E-government Development Report No.1* [中国电子政务发展报告: 电子政务蓝皮书 No.1]., Wang, C. (2005). *China E-government Development Report No.2* [中国电子政务发展报告: No.2]. Social Sciences Academic Press (China).

China Unicom (UNINET 中国联通), *China Mobile* (CMNET 中国移动), *China Intel. Economic and Trade Net* (CIETNET 中国经贸网), *China Great Wall Communications* (CGWNET 中国长城互联网) and *China Satcom* (CSNET 中国卫星互联网), were also set up to provide internet services (CNINC Report, 2006). Note that until now, all these major networks have been owned by the state, providing internet connection to regional *Internet Service Providers* (ISPs) (Herold, 2012; Li, 2004). Furthermore, all these backbone networks are required to be “at least fifty-one percent controlled by State-owned companies” (Kissel, 2007, p. 246). By July 2001, these national networks accommodated approximately 620 ISPs who in turn serviced more than 1,500 e-commerce websites (CNNIC, 1997). Furthermore, more than 300 cities had obtained high-speed connections to the network.

The rapid expansion of internet infrastructure led to an exponential increase in internet users and domestic websites. Figure 3.1 reports the growth of internet use in China from 1994 to 2002. In 1994, when the internet was still a novelty in China, only 1,600 individuals used the internet, a figure that seems minuscule against the vast population of China. By late 1997, the number had increased to 80,000, with 299,000 computers connected to the internet. Due to the increase in networks set up to serve the public, there was a significant jump in the year of 1998, with 2.1 million individuals connected to the internet by December (CNNIC Report, 2005), and a dramatic leap to 8.9 million by 1999. By the end of the year 2002, the number of internet users in China had reached 59.1 million. This figure puts China as the third largest internet user in the world in 2002, after the United States and Japan (CNNIC, 1998; CNNIC, 2000; People’s Daily, 2002; Tan, 1999, p.263).

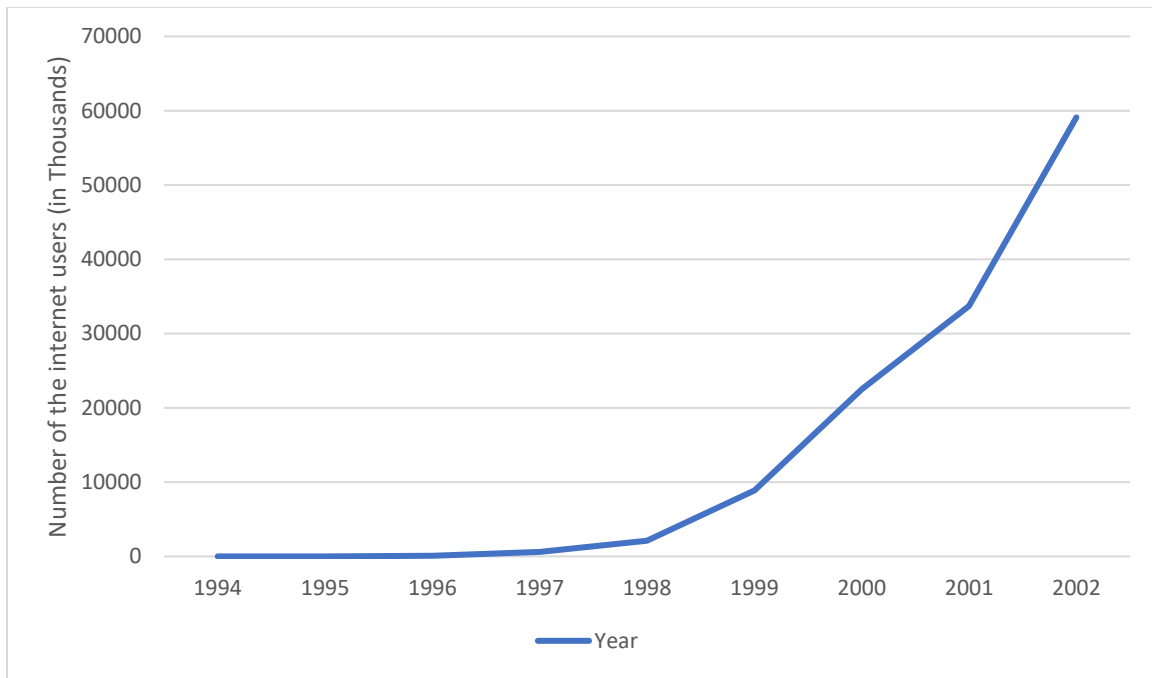


Figure 3.1 Growth of Internet users in China under Jiang Zemin (1994–2002). From CNNIC Semi-Annual Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China (1994–2005).

In the same year, two other projects – *the Golden Card* and *Golden Customs* (also translated as *Golden Gate*) – were added to the informatisation effort. The former was added in June 1993, focused on developing a national electronic payment system, including credit and debit card services, to accelerate the adoption of electronic banking across China. By the end of 2002, this project had extended to banks and department stores in over 300 cities, with more than 60 million debit and credit cards issued by financial institutions in circulation (Linchuan & Hachigian, 2005, p. 17). This initiative was crucial for the commercialisation of media in two key ways. First, it facilitated the rise of online transactions, making it easier for consumers to pay for digital content and services. Second, by promoting electronic banking, it supported the growth of e-commerce, closely linked to digital advertising and the broader media industry. The latter, *Golden Customs*, was proposed by Vice Premier Li Lanqing and aimed to establish a network of foreign trade information connecting the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade with the Customs Bureau. While this project had a more direct impact on trade, it indirectly supported media commercialisation by enhancing the flow of international business and trade information (Unwin, 2009).

During Jiang's era, several other *Golden Projects* were initiated. One of those which may have had significant influence was the *Golden Security Project*, also known as the “*Golden Shield*” (Jindun gongcheng 金盾工程). This project was initiated by Jiang's government in 1998, but began its operations under Hu Jintao's era in November 2003. This project is often associated with the development of China's internet censorship and surveillance capabilities, aiming to establish a sophisticated monitoring and filtering system to regulate internet content and maintain social stability. Part of a broader effort by the Chinese government to monitor and control the flow of information on the internet, the project directly influences the online media's operation, content production and dissemination, which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Overall, the implementation of these projects marked a significant transition from a state-controlled media landscape towards a more commercialised and competitive market. By upgrading the technological infrastructure, the *Golden Projects* not only improved access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) but also encouraged the development of new media forms. The expansion of internet access further paved the way for the rise of digital news platforms that would eventually support We-media.

3.3.2 Continued Expansion and Innovation in Digital Technology under Hu

Hu Jintao's tenure was marked by continued emphasis on market-driven media development, with substantial efforts to expand digital infrastructure. Addressing the *National Science and Technology Conference* in January 2006, Hu highlighted the opportunities and challenges presented by the global digital technological revolution. He stated that “information technology will further become an important engine driving economic growth and the spread of knowledge”. Hu stressed the increasing role of knowledge in economic and social development, asserting that national wealth and human life improvements are increasingly dependent on the accumulation and innovation of knowledge. He concluded that “in today's era, those who have the advantage in knowledge and technological innovation will be able to take the initiative in development” (Hu, 2006). Building on the groundwork laid by his predecessor, Hu Jintao recognised the strategic importance of further integrating digital technologies into China's economic development plans. However, compared to Jiang Zemin's

effects on building the digital foundation, Hu's approach was multifaceted, aiming not only to enhance China's technological infrastructure, but also to bolster its competitive edge in the global market. This period saw significant state support in high-tech research and development, particularly focusing on information technology and telecommunications, aligning with Hu's vision of transforming China into an innovation-driven economy and ensuring that the nation kept pace with global technological advancements.

Since 2003, China has dramatically increased investment in *Research and Development*, having invested 168.9 billion CNY in scientific development in 2006, more than double that invested in 2002, accounting for 4.2 percent of the country's overall fiscal expenditure, focusing on key areas such as high-tech industries, green energy, new materials, and information technology (China Daily, 2007). Moreover, in 2006, Hu's government set the aim that "by the end of 2020... China will achieve more science and technological breakthroughs of great world influence, qualifying it to join the ranks of the world's most innovative countries" (Hu, 2006). In chasing this goal, the Chinese government has made unprecedented investments in research capacity while also enhancing incentives for firms to innovate. This strategy encompasses a range of supportive measures for start-ups and high-tech enterprises, including tax incentives, increasing funding opportunities, and the creation of high-tech zones and science parks (Yu et al., 2011, p. 25).

These initiatives reflected Hu Jintao's strategic development in two ways. Firstly, they greatly promoted the expansion of digital infrastructure and internet accessibility across China. This growth was also propelled by the development of new telecommunications networks and the upgrade of existing ones to support high-speed internet access. During Hu's administration, the introduction of 3G mobile telecommunications technology was a significant step forward in enhancing mobile internet access and services, establishing further development for later 4G technology in Xi Jinping's China. The development of digital technology had a profound impact on the media landscape, as it facilitated the rapid expansion of digital infrastructure necessary for the growth of digital media platforms. Moreover, the proliferation of broadband internet and mobile networks enabled millions more Chinese citizens to access the internet. By the end of June 2007, internet users in China reached 162

million, marking an increase of 39 million over the same period in 2000. It surpassed the United States to become the world's largest Internet-using population, reaching 221 million by the end of February 2008 (Reuters, 2008). Furthermore, the broadband users expanded to 122 million, and the wireless internet users accessing via mobile phones reached 44.3 million (Xi's speech, cited from Shi, 2007; *China Youth Daily*, 2021). The surge of internet users in China not only reflects the potential of the media business market, but also it laid the foundation for the rise of We-media in China.

Hence, this strategic focus on digital infrastructure and technological advancement under both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao's administration laid the essential foundations for the next stages of China's digital evolution, setting the stage for the explosive growth of digital media and We-media platforms that continue to shape China's media landscape today. The next section explores how the convergence of commercial imperatives with digital communication technologies catalysed the emergence of We-media.

3.4 The Emergence of We-Media: A By-Product of Commercialisation, Technological Advancements and Political Control

Under both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao's leadership, combined efforts to advance technological infrastructure and liberalise economic policies created fertile ground for the rise of digital media, particularly social media platforms that have significantly reshaped public interaction and discourse, leading to the emergence of We-media. In particular, We-media's emergence under this context has experienced two stages: a) the rise of personal blogs; b) shift to monetisation on multi-functioned social media platforms.

Under these two leaders, China not only built an extensive digital infrastructure but also witnessed the rapid expansion and evolution of digital media. This transformation was particularly evident in the realm of social media platforms, which have significantly reshaped public interaction and discourse, ultimately leading to the emergence of We-media.

3.4.1 Stage I: The rise of personal blogs and its impacts

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, China saw the emergence of its first generation of internet portals and early digital media platforms. One aspect outstanding in significance has been the rise of personal blogging platforms, representing the beginning of the digital media's rise in China. Initial blogging platforms such as *Sina Blog* (Xinlang boke 新浪博客) and *Sohu Blog* (Sohu boke 搜狐博客) played crucial roles, leading a development in individualistic expression within the Chinese digital space. Their functions are similar to those of blogs in the Western societies. For example, these platforms primarily served as personal journals, offering individuals a platform to express thoughts and share experiences. They provided robust tools for writing and managing posts, incorporating multimedia elements like images and videos, and interacting with readers through comments. They also featured a strong community aspect, with users able to follow each other's blogs, comment on posts, and share content across social networks.

Once these blog platforms were open to service, they soon attracted a wide array of users, in particular celebrities, academics, entrepreneurs and professionals. Many used the platforms to share personal stories, comment on societal issues, or publish creative works (Luqiu, 2006; Zhang, 2006; Lei, 2007). As MacKinnon (2008) observes, "some Chinese academics have begun to use blogs as a platform to discuss and publicise their research; educators are using blogs to share curriculum and communicate with students; and lawyers are using them to discuss legal cases. Even more significantly, a few Chinese government officials at the local and even national level have begun to blog as a way to improve communication with their constituencies (p.13)". Especially for these people considered to be "professionals" or "influencers", once they opened blog accounts, these accounts immediately gained followers. Almost everything they posted on the blogs, including opinions or stories, could spontaneously yield a wide discussion. For example, influential bloggers like Han Han, who became an icon among China's 80s-90s generation and started his blog on *Sina Web* in 2006. He quickly became "China's No.1 blogger", with his posts receiving millions of views and thousands of comments on average (Cai, 2015). One significant

case relates to his three blogs, namely, “*discussion of the revolution*”, “*to talk about the democracy*” and “*demands of freedom*”. In these articles, Han Han incisively criticised the CCP’s political system and called for political reform. His articles provoked a heated debate and discussion online. Growing numbers of netizens and celebrities participated in the discussions. Although these discussions eventually ceased due to censorship, their influence marked the beginning of Chinese people receiving the opportunity to express their own voices publicly (Brady, 2013).

Another quintessential example of blogs’ power was their significant role to inform people during the Xiamen PX protests in 2007. Over 10,000 people protested against the construction of a paraxylene (PX) chemical plant in Xiamen, leading the government to eventually cancel the plant plans after public opposition, debates, and environmental assessments (Sina, 2007; (Huang & Yip, 2012). Regarding this kind of protest, traditional media, in particular local mainstream media, often following directives from the government's propaganda department, predominantly highlighted the economic advantages of the PX project (Y. Li, 2018), while downplaying or omitting its potential environmental and health risks (Liu et al., 2016; Tang & Côté, 2021; Zhu, 2017). In the case of Xiamen, due to the censorship, three mainstream local newspapers, *Xiamen Daily* (*Xiamen ribao* 厦门日报), *Xiamen Evening* (*Xiamen wanbao* 厦门晚报), *Xiamen Business* (*Xiamen shangbao*, 厦门商报) remained silent about the protests (Brunner, 2016; Huang & Yip, 2012; Wang, 2017). However, a story named “10 billion chemical project safety disputes in Xiamen” was published on 17 March 2007 in *China Business Journal* (*Zhongguo jingyingbao* 中国经营报), a Beijing based publication (Sina, 2007). In the same month *Southern Metropolis Daily* (*Nanfang dushibao* 南方都市报), a newspaper based in Guangzhou, and *China Youth Daily* (*Zhongguo qingnianbao* 中国青年报), a Beijing based press, respectively carried relevant reports⁹.

⁹ In China, especially for some sensitive topics and in-depth investigative reporting, cross-regional reporting has become an essential means of news gathering. This strategy was quite popular and frequently used during Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao’s eras, as a way for critical journalists to act as ‘watchdogs’ while avoiding obstruction from local governments. Through this approach, journalists can access a broader range of information sources and collect more diverse evidence, revealing multiple facets of the truth to the public Repnikova, M. (2017). *Media politics in China: Improvising power under authoritarianism*. Cambridge University Press. , Tong, J., & Sparks, C. (2009). Investigative journalism in

At that time, the internet and digital media platforms emerged as vital channels for people including professional journalists and media practitioners who wished to disseminate information on the PX project, bypassing the limitations imposed on traditional media. Soon this issue was picked up and posted by a journalist's blog by Lian Yue (连岳), a former journalist at Southern Weekend (Tang, 2010). He closely followed this topic and soon published over 100 posts about this issue on his blogs, disseminating details "about the plant, its impact on the people, the dangers it posed to the town, its opposition, and so forth". Among these, 53 blogs aimed at "exposing the official cover-up", 54 highlighted "the weakness of Xiamen media", and 32 discussed "the process of removing the PX projects" (Tang, 2016, p. 76). By the end of March, Lian Yue was encouraging residents to "break the information blockade and to save themselves" through a series of actions (Chin-Fu, 2013, p. 46). Lian Yue's blogs quickly gained widespread attention across China. This rapid dissemination was facilitated by the fact that, in 2007, Xiamen was a region where many people owned cell phones, had social media accounts, and had access to the Internet.

Furthermore, platforms like the *Bull Blog* (Niubo Wang, 牛博网), founded by Luo Yonghao, also played a crucial role in retaining and broadcasting content related to the PX protests, even under significant pressure. While the Bull Blog itself might not be as widely recognised internationally as some other Chinese social media platforms, it played a significant role in its time for hosting and disseminating content that often pushed the boundaries of what was permissible in China's tightly regulated media environment. Many of its users were considered as liberals, public intellectuals or professional media practitioners in China, such as Chaijing (柴静), Aiweiwei (艾未未), Ran Yunfei (冉云飞), Mo Zhinxu (莫之许), and Lian Yue mentioned above. During the Xiamen protests, this blog platform conducted a detailed live text broadcast about the protesters' activities, which was then forwarded by many media practitioners and subsequently republished by major media outlets, domestically and internationally (Huang & Yip, 2012). With local media not addressing the issue and officials failing to make a response, people with doubts about the government turned to these online

China today. *Journalism studies*, 10(3), 337-352. , Wang, H. (2016). *The transformation of investigative journalism in China: From journalists to activists*. Rowman & Littlefield. .

platforms as their primary source of information (Chin-Fu, 2013; Huang & Yip, 2012; Liu, 2018).

This was a significant change, as bloggers quickly transcended personal use, evolving the platforms for broader public discourse. Lagerkvist (2010) notes that these blogging activities not only attracted readers, but also by presenting diverse perspectives and narratives on social issues, subtly pushed the boundaries of public discourse within a censorship-laden landscape. This trend further encouraged more ordinary netizens to embrace blogs (Friedrichsen & Muhi-Benninghaus, 2013), which was perceived as a liberating divergence from the state-controlled media narrative (MacKinnon, 2008; Hassid, 2012; Fang, 2022). Consequently, the Chinese blogosphere expanded rapidly, increasing from just a few sites in 2002 to more than 20 million blogs by the end of 2006 (Agence France Presse, 2006; Corner, 2006).

Yang (2009) noted that personal blogs in China were perceived as more than just online diaries but also served as catalysts for citizen journalism. In this sense, many scholars hold a positive attitude towards this trend and see it as the development of grassroots journalism in China (e.g., Thompson, 2012; Zhang, 2006; Lei, 2007). One outstanding feature of these bloggers was that the impetus for these individuals was not monetary gain, but rather the quest to express, inform, and influence (Friedrichsen & Muhi-Benninghaus, 2013). Also, scholars like Thompson (2012), Zhang (2006), and Lei (2007) observed that these early content creators on blogs were driven by a desire to express opinions and share information with the public. They positioned themselves as “opinion leaders” and, in some cases, whistleblowers, shedding light on injustices and social issues often overlooked by state-controlled media.

The development of early blogs played a crucial role in the emergence and development of We-media, especially as platforms that democratise content creation and dissemination. Before that, people in China traditionally got their information from mainstream traditional media, which has been heavily regulated and centralised, with content creation in the hands of a few large organisations that controlled what information could be published and broadcasted. However, the advent of blogs disrupted this model by allowing anyone with internet access to create and publish content (Lagerkvist, 2005). This empowerment of individual expression is foundational

to the concept of We-media, where the "We" represents the collective power of individuals to act as media producers (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2006).

Furthermore, blogs have been instrumental in promoting UGC as a core component of We-media's offerings, laying the groundwork for a UGC-driven business model. Although the initial motivation for blogging was not monetary, the influence and large followings garnered by successful individual bloggers eventually opened doors to monetisation opportunities. According to Constantinides and Fountain (2008) and Tang and Huang (2020), UGC is recognised as one of the most influential sources of innovation in the Web 2.0 business model. This evolution in content creation turned traditional "media-to-audience" marketing into an "individual-to-individual" communication model. As described by Wang (2014), this shift allows consumers to increasingly rely on "unfiltered, dynamic, and topical information provided by their peers", transforming the way information is consumed and trusted. The credibility and influence established by early bloggers also made them attractive partners for brands and advertisers seeking to tap into their loyal audiences.

Peer recommendations and the viral nature of some content further amplified this effect. As this shift progressed, individual bloggers had the opportunities to disseminate their UGC widely, extending beyond personal networks to global audiences, extending the reach of their influence (Evans, 2008). Consequently, as UGC garnered wider audiences, content creators could monetise their influence through various channels such as advertising, pay-per-view content, and sponsored posts, as noted by researchers like Xiao (2016), Zhang (2019), and Yang (2013). More discussion of the We-media business model and how it has been shaped will be presented in the next chapter.

3.4.2 Stage II: Shift to Monetisation on Multi-functioned Social Media Platforms: *Weibo* and *WeChat*

As the late 2000s progressed, with the expansion of broadband and mobile internet, more varied and multi-functioned social media platforms emerged, transforming the

digital media landscape from merely a space for personal expression to a dynamic platform for widespread social interaction and commercial engagement. The advent of microblogging platforms like *Weibo* (微博) and multifunctional messaging apps like *WeChat* (微信) has enabled real-time news updates and facilitated public engagement on a range of issues, from environmental concerns to government policies.

The ease of use and the ability to disseminate information quickly have made these platforms extremely popular, appealing to a tech-savvy population eager for timely and unfiltered news. For example, *Weibo* took the concept of blogging but transformed it into a microblogging format that allowed for quicker and broader dissemination of information. It is a twitter-like social media platform, which maintains similar functions such as the 140-character limit posting, “@username”, “#Hashtags”, and retweet (re-post) (Gao, Q. et al., 2012). Its format, similar to Twitter, allowed for rapid dissemination of short, timely messages and multimedia content. Its capability has been instrumental, especially during events where real-time information was crucial, such as during natural disasters or social movements (Kaminska & Rutten, 2014). One well-known case, the Wenzhou train collision in 2011, exemplifies its function as a space for civic engagement and a source for news, often outpacing traditional media (Shan & Tang, 2017).

The later *WeChat*'s arrival took this form of engagement to a different level. It was launched by *Tencent* in 2011, originally functioning as a simple messenger app, a Chinese equivalent to *WhatsApp*. But it has grown beyond *WhatsApp*, into a multifunctional platform integrating social networking, e-commerce, digital payments, and more. This integration has made it an indispensable part of daily life in China, influencing everything from personal interactions to business transactions. For example, it introduced features like “*Moment*” (pengyou quan 朋友圈) for personal updates and a “*WeChat public account platform*” (weixin gongzhonghao 微信公众号) for public accounts to post their media content for users to subscribe (Huang, 2021). This transition has blurred the lines between personal social networking and media publishing, enhancing the scope of what We-media can cover.

In particular, the *WeChat public account platform* allows content creators to build audiences and monetise their offerings directly through the platform. “Even the smallest creator deserves its own personal brand” (再小的个体，也有自己的品牌) is the slogan of the WeChat Public account platform (Guo, 2024). Anyone can register on this platform and own their personal We-media brand, and audiences can search for the content they are interested in and press the subscription button for these We-media. After subscription, We-media owners on this platform can send their content and all updates they would like to share with the subscribers, similar to a newsletter (*Tencent corporate overview presentation*, 2020). This has been crucial for small businesses, influencers, and traditional media outlets alike, and it soon became one of the most popular platforms for We-media in China.

The capacity of these platforms to reach vast audiences with compelling content fuelled their explosive growth. According to the statistics, the number of registered users for *Sina Weibo*, the leading microblogging site in China, swelled from 9 million in its first year in 2009 to 582 million monthly active users by the first quarter of 2022 (Thomala, 2022). Similarly, the development of *WeChat* was also impressive: by November 2015, it had 650 million monthly active users, nearly 72 per cent of *WhatsApp*’s global achievement (Wang, 2016), and this number reached 1.2 billion by 2020 (*Tencent Q3 Report*, 2020). As of the first quarter of 2022, *WeChat* had recorded more than 1.26 billion active users, with almost every smartphone user in China having a *WeChat* account (Iqbal, 2022). Additionally, more than 80% of *WeChat* users use the *WeChat public account platform* service (QuestMobile, 2019), and more than half of them subscribe a minimum of 10 to 12 self-branding We-media on that platform. Besides that, nearly 74.2% of them follow these We-media channels to read their content for social news and daily information (Elad, 2022). Currently, with over 25 million We-media accounts on WeChat public account platforms, its popularity and commercial values are undeniable (Tencent Report, 2015; Wang, 2016).

The rapid user base expansion of these digital platforms led to their exploration of commercial avenues, notably advertising. As social media platforms like *Weibo* and *WeChat* attracted millions of users, they became valuable spaces for advertisers looking to reach a broad and engaged audience. For example, *Weibo* and *WeChat*

started to integrate advertising models into their systems, and user-generated content became a tool for brand promotion and marketing. For example, on the *WeChat public account platform*, when the accounts registered on the platform get more than 500 subscribers, they can embed ads directly with their media content, earning revenue based on the number of clicks received (IE-5, 2002). These economic gains attract more and more users; in particular, influencers and KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) joined these platforms and created their personal We-media brand, emerging as the new drivers of consumer behaviour, leveraging their follower base for commercial gains (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012), just like the example of Papi Jiang, introduced before.

The large and engaged user bases of both platforms have attracted significant advertising dollars, reshaping the landscape of digital advertising in China. According to statistics, the total value of internet advertisement reached around 15.24 billion CNY in 2015, while social media advertisement accounted for 2.032 billion CNY (Xu, 2015), one third of which belonged to We-media (ASKCI, 2020). Taking *WeChat official accounts* as an example, according to the annual report of *The New List*, the number of advertising transactions grew by 67 percent, and the total income growth reached more than 158 per cent in 2016 (Iimedia Research, 2017). According to Xia's research (2017), for some We-media users who enjoy a large number of followers, the revenue from advertising has even exceeded many traditional big media organisations.

Thus, the development of *blogs*, and later updated multi-functioned social media platforms like *Weibo* and *WeChat*, as introduced above, has been instrumental in building the foundations of We-media in China. Moreover, platforms like *Weibo* and *WeChat* have not only transformed the media landscape by shifting from traditional media forms to dynamic, integrated digital platforms but also created new paradigms for how media is consumed and monetised. Their development from basic communication tools to comprehensive platforms supporting social interaction, commercial transactions, and content creation has been pivotal in the rise of We-media. These platforms have enabled a more connected, real-time, and interactive media environment, setting the stage for future innovations in digital media and e-commerce in China and beyond.

3.4.3 Challenges to Media Commercialisation: State Control and Regulation

Media in China has undergone a profound transformation over the last few decades, evolving from a tightly controlled government tool into a marketised media ecosystem encompassing a vivid developed digital media. This evolution has been accompanied by an equally significant expansion in regulatory measures designed to maintain state control and suppress dissent while navigating the challenges of digital information dissemination.

As mentioned before, prior to the 1990s, the Chinese media landscape was characterised by a complete state monopoly. All forms of traditional media, including newspapers, television, and radio, were owned and operated by the government. The primary role of the media was to serve as the mouthpiece of the state, disseminating party ideologies and government policies. This period was marked by stringent censorship practices, where the media content was meticulously vetted to ensure it conformed to the political mandates of the state.

The introduction of the internet to China in the early 1990s marked a significant shift in the media landscape. Due to the supporting policies from the governments and the development of digital communication technology, the internet quickly became a commercial and social arena, leading to the proliferation of digital media, seeing notably the rise of personal blog and multi-functioned social media platforms like *Weibo* and *WeChat*, leading to the emergence of We-media. However, this explosion of digital content, especially the UGC, has prompted significant governmental interventions aimed at controlling the information ecosystem, which have significantly shaped the pathway of We-media's development in China. Recognising the potential challenges posed by this new medium, Chinese government quickly implemented robust measures to ensure that it could maintain control over the narrative. The tactics employed by the Chinese state to control digital content are multifaceted and extend beyond simple legislative measures. Under this context, three main tactics that the CCP adopt frequently to control and regulate the Chinese cyberspace can be identified. These tactics includes internet access control, media content regulation, and multi-layered controlling strategies cooperated with digital platforms. All these tactics create a vague implication of uncertainty, leading to self-censorship among both individual users and digital platforms.

a) Internet Access Control

The first tactic is internet access control, referring to controlling of physical access to the internet service, and China's censorship apparatus is central to this as "the most extensive, technologically sophisticated, and broad-reaching system of Internet filtering in the world" (Krim, 2006, p.4). The system mainly operates at two levels: external access control and internal access control. Since the development of the internet in China during the 1990s, the Party has created communication technologies to manage the physical connection to the internet. As mentioned, currently China owns nine state-licensed Internet Access Providers (IAPs), and they are all state-owned companies (Li, 2004). These IAPs, in turn, provide regional Internet Service Providers (ISPs) with access to backbone connections. According to the law¹⁰, all relevant entities, including IAPs and ISPs, must register through the given government apparatuses. Failing to comply can result in serious punishments by the government (ONI, 2005). In other words, the Chinese state governs internet traffic within its borders and attempts to regulate the entry of external internet traffic into China.

Based on this foundation of structure, filtering primarily occurs at the "backbone level" of China's network through the construction of a nationwide firewall, also known as the *Great Firewall of China* (Liang, 2012, pp1429). Established in the late 1990s and continuously updated, the *Great Firewall* represents one of the most extensive efforts by the Chinese state to regulate the informational inputs and outputs of its citizens. It effectively isolates the Chinese digital space from the rest of the world, ensuring that only government-approved content reaches the public. This setup regulates the backbone network connections with the outside world, effectively filtering and blocking access to "unhappy information" (Li, 2004, p24).

On a domestic level, all the ISPs, along with Chinese internet websites such as search engines and digital media platforms, play a crucial role in content filtering. This often

¹⁰ According to Telecommunications Regulation of China, Measures on the Administration of International Communication Ports: "all international telecommunications gateways should be approved by the government; all the backbone network operators should meet some particular requirements for approval; all telecommunication enterprises that desire to operate the international telecommunication services must be approved by the administrative departments, and shall transact such services via the international telecommunication gateway set up upon approval of the government." (The State Council, 2000)

manifests in subtle ways such as “network errors, redirections, or lengthy timeouts”, which obscure the act of deliberate blocking (ONI, 2016, p.3; Roberts , 2018). To ensure cooperation from domestic ISPs and internet website companies, the government has established a series of regulations to achieve this aim. For instance, the “*Measures for Managing Internet Information Services*” in 2000 were considered as the first regulations to impose liability on all ICPs, ISPs and individuals (Cullen & Choy, pp.329).

b) Media Content Regulation

The second tactic in China’s internet governance is media content regulation. It encompasses a comprehensive set of measures designed to control the digital narrative and ensure that the circulated information aligns with state policies. It includes direct censorship and licensing requirements, to oversee and manage the public discourse on digital platforms. These controls are crucial for preventing the spread of content considered politically sensitive or harmful, thereby maintaining the socio-political order.

Direct censorship

In the aspect of direct censorship, this type of regulation has long been established in the very early stage of internet infrastructure in China and it continues to evolve over time. It is routinely practised through the deletion of posts, blocking of websites, and the shutdown of social media accounts that host or promote content deemed sensitive or undesirable by the government, typically supported by legislative measures or content guidelines.

For example, the “*Interim Provisions Governing Management of Computer Information Networks*”, introduced in 1996, were among the first regulations to outline how the internet would be regulated, focusing on controlling the flow of information to prevent the spread of content deemed harmful to state security or public morality (Newbold, pp.507-8). It was also the first document to officially impose liability upon the individual content creators, setting severe restrictions against producing or transmitting content that could “harm national security or disclose state secrets” or “threaten social stability and promote sexually suggestive materials” (art. 13). This legislation significantly

increased the state's control over internet content by making individuals legally responsible for their online activities.

Another important reflection of the content regulation in China was a series of new regulation policies that were issued in the 2000s. The 2000s witnessed an explosion of digital media forms, including *blogs*, social media platforms like *Sina Weibo* and *WeChat*, which gained popularity among Chinese internet users. In response, the government implemented the "*Measures for Managing Internet Information Services*" in 2000 (The 2000 Measures) and the "*Regulations on the Administration of Internet News Information Services*" in 2005 (The 2005 Regulations) (Zhu, 2010). These laws were crafted to tighten the state's grip on the rapidly diversifying media landscape, introducing content restrictions and stringent licensing requirements that expanded the state's regulatory reach into nearly all facets of online expression.

In particular, *the 2000 Measures* mandates that no ICPs¹¹ (Internet Content Providers), ISPs and individuals should produce or disseminate nine enumerated categories of information that contain any of the following:

- 1) information that goes against the basic principles set in the Constitution;
- 2) information that endangers national security, divulges state secrets, subverts the government, or undermines national unity;
- 3) information that is detrimental to the honour and interests of the state;
- 4) information that instigates ethnic hatred or ethnic discrimination, or that undermines national unity;
- 5) information that undermines the state's policy for religions, or that preaches evil cults or feudalistic and superstitious beliefs;
- 6) information that disseminates rumours, disturbs social order, or undermines social stability;
- 7) information that disseminates

¹¹ In the context of the 2000 Measures for Managing Internet Information Services, ICPs include websites, platforms, and publishers responsible for the information or services they provide online. Source from Rongji, P. Z. (2010). Measures for the Management of Internet Information Services: Decree No. 292 of the State Council of the People's Republic of China. *Chinese Law & Government*, 43(5), 30-35.

pornography and other salacious materials; that promotes gambling, violence, homicide, and terror, or that instigates the commission of crimes; 8) information that insults or slanders other people, or that infringes upon other people's legitimate rights and interests; 9) other information prohibited by the law or administrative regulations.

(2000 Measures, art. 15).

From the excerpts in Article 15 of *the 2000 Measures*, it is easy to see that provisions are notably “vague, confusing and inconsistent” (Li, 2004). This ambiguity makes it difficult for most ordinary internet users to determine which topics might be considered unappropriated or harmful to “the honour and interests of the state”, thereby broadening the scope of censorship to include a vast array of potential offences. For example, those discussing economic reforms or environmental issues, could be swiftly removed under the pretext of preserving national honour. For digital media platforms, this translated into a complex, often burdensome requirement to continually monitor and censor user content on their platforms, not just to comply with the law but to avoid severe penalties.

Licensing Requirements

The licensing requirements represent another significant mechanism to control the internet information at a domestic level. Digital media platforms must obtain licences from the government, which can be revoked if the platform fails to comply with regulatory standards. This requirement gives the state leverage to enforce platform compliance with its censorship goals. For instance, major platforms like *Weibo*, *WeChat*, and others operate under strict conditions that compel them to monitor and regulate user content. According to *the 2000 Measure*, all commercial websites, including all digital media platforms, must obtain a licence from the State Council or other appropriate local government departments to legally offer their services online (The 2000 Measures, art. 7).

In 2005, two sets of regulations were promulgated to further regulate the internet, namely, *the “Registration Administration Measures for Non-Commercial Internet Information Services”* (2005 Registration Measures) and *the “Rules on the*

Administration of Internet News Information Services” (2005 Administration of News). These two new rules strengthen existing internet laws and identify broader categories of forbidden information, especially focusing more on the emerging use of social media platforms like blogging (Miao et al., 2021). In particular, the former primarily set registration requirements for all non-commercial websites to register with the Communications Administration Office in their local province. Anyone who does not register is prohibited from operating a non-commercial website within China (Registration Measures, 2005, art.5), while commercial websites were already subject to licensure by the 2000 Measures (2000 Measure, art.4).

However, the *2005 Administration of News* introduced several significant changes to the regulation of internet sites and activities. Previous regulations did not impose restrictions on the internet service providers such as Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), blogs, Short-Message Systems (SMS) via cellular telephones. However, the updated 2005 regulations explicitly included their uses due to the rapidly growing popularity of these platforms, preventing individual users from posting controversial news or political commentary (Chin, 2018). Laws such as the “*Decision of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress on Strengthening Information Protection on Networks*” (State Council, 2010) required users to register with their real identity, linking online activity to real-world identities and deterring dissent. Moreover, earlier regulations also did not differentiate between internet users who could publish news information, and those who could not. However, the *2005 Administration of News* explicitly set the rules to prevent individual internet users from posting any controversial news or political commentary. As Chen et al. (2016) points out, the state anticipated that these new rules would be more effective on individuals rather than news organisations, as the latter are usually more regulated, whereas individual content creators, such as bloggers and those who post UGC on social media platforms are harder to control.

In this regard, the licensing requirements and regulatory framework established in the early 2000s and strengthened through subsequent measures reflect China's commitment to controlling the digital space. They provide the legal foundation for monitoring and regulating digital media platforms, compelling them to act in alignment

with state policies while limiting the scope for dissenting voices and alternative narratives.

c) Multi-layer Controlling Strategy

Multi-layer controlling strategy serves as an undated state response to the rise and expansion of digital media in China. It refers to a decentralised control method of granting the censorship and controlling power to the media platform providers and pertinent companies, adding an extra layer in the entire state controlling strategy. The government has notably adopted this strategy since the 2000s, urging internet service providers, companies, and platform owners to censor and regulate the online content under their control. According to Article 14 of *the 2000 Measures*, IAPs and ISPs are required to record the dates and times when users accessed the internet, along with the users' account numbers, the addresses and the names of the websites they visited, the content of the information and the telephone number they used to access the Internet (2000 Measures). These records must be kept for a period of sixty days and provided to the authorities upon request (Zheng, 2012; Cull & Choy, 2013, pp.331).

To further strengthen this strategy, later in 2002, the "*Public Pledge on Self-discipline for China's Internet Industry*" was released, aiming to foster an agreement between Chinese internet services providers and companies that operate sites in China to "promote internet usage, prevent cybercrimes, foster healthy industry competition and avoid intellectual property violations" (Weber & Jia, 2007, pp.775-6). Specifically, the pledge introduced "four principles of self-discipline for the Internet industry", which are "patriotism, observance of the law, fairness, and trustworthiness" (China People's Daily, 2002). In this case, the internet service and platform companies who signed the pledge agree not to post or disseminate pernicious information that is considered illegal, such as "superstition and obscenity", or that may "jeopardise state security" and "disrupt social stability" (Wired, 2002).

Notably, these internet services providers and companies are also authorised to conduct monitoring and delete certain content when it is considered as 'harmful'. Furthermore, they have the ability to block "harmful information" from the international website, including content related to "democratic reform" and "criticism of CCP" (Wired,

2002). After this pledge was published, it was signed by over 300 internet service and content providers within the first six months, including major internet giants like *Renmin*, *Xinhua News Service*, *Sina*, *Sohu* and *NetEase*. Although signing was voluntary for them, not signing could have affected these companies' ability to obtain Internet Content Provider Licences, further impacting their business (Hindley & Hosuk, 2009).

d) The Effects of Vague Regulations

As discussed, the controlling strategies adopted by the Chinese government reveal a picture of a changing state controlling system. These strategies intentionally include vague policies and regulations, leaving internet companies and individual content creators uncertain about how to operate within the law on digital media. This vagueness, as observed by Li (2016, p. 6), creates space for government intervention in company operations and interference with internet users whenever necessary.

In the meantime, this regulatory ambiguity, whether explicit or implicit, results in heightened self-censorship. Individuals and platforms are deterred from disseminating sensitive information that might fall into one of the prohibited categories. Internet service providers and digital media website owners are particularly affected, as they are compelled to adopt a principle of "self-discipline". They must navigate this regulatory uncertainty while cooperating with the government's stringent internet intervention to safeguard their business interests in China (Wacker, 2003).

Furthermore, this regulatory vagueness leaves space for the government to adopt flexible and selective approaches to control media, that can be adjusted according to the state's needs. Research by King et al. (2014) shows that contrary to the popular belief that China suppresses all forms of criticism, the Chinese government tolerates a level of criticism directed at state policies or leaders. However, posts that could potentially mobilise collective action are more likely to be censored. Roberts (2018) "porous censorship model" illustrates how the government employs a mix of "fear, friction, and flooding" mechanisms to control the flow of information and shape public discourse. By linking online activity to real-world identities through mandatory real-identity registration, imposing severe penalties and creating uncertainty about what content might be offensive, these regulations induce widespread self-censorship with

fear. Also, friction, as technical barriers are created through monitoring and content filtering requirements to limit users' ability to access undesirable and censored information. Meanwhile, licensing requirements ensure these internet websites and digital media platforms align with state policies, flooding their website with pro-government content or irrelevant information, diverting attention away from sensitive topics or criticism. This "flooding" strategy has been expanded under Xi Jinping's government, due to its attitudes on the development of We-media, which will be discussed next in chapter four.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter explored the pathway of emergence of We-media in China, analysing the underlying factors contributing to its development. On the one hand, the commercialisation and development of digital technology have led to a striking transformation in China's media landscape, resulting in the rise of digital media and the emergence of We-media, where individuals and independent creators share their media content, often generating significant followings and providing opportunities to monetise their content. On the other hand, the rapid expansion of the digital media industry and the surge in users also pose new challenges to the Chinese government, requiring them to adapt their strategies for managing and regulating this dynamic sector.

To formalise control over digital media, the government has enacted a series of regulations over the individual users and digital platforms as well. Meanwhile, it also requires internet service providers and digital platforms to enforce internal censorship and holds them legally accountable for disseminating prohibited content. During Xi Jinping's era, control over online content has increased dramatically, particularly affecting the development of We-media in the 2010s. The next chapter will focus on Xi Jinping's specific control and growth strategies regarding the rise of We-media and their implications for information control in the digital era.

Chapter 4: Between Tightening Control and Growth: Understanding Xi Jinping's We-media Strategy and the CCP's legitimacy

In recent years, China's media landscape has undergone significant transformations, shaped by increasingly tightening political controls under Xi Jinping's leadership. As discussed in Chapter Three, the reform eras of Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao, spanning from the late 1970s through 2012, were characterised by profound shifts in China's approach to media commercialisation and technological advancements. These periods marked a decisive move towards integrating China into a more open economy, expanding the boundaries of public discourse in the digital sphere within an authoritarian framework. Particularly noteworthy was the emergence of We-media, which represented a significant evolution in how individuals and independent creators could produce and share content, fostering a new form of journalism and content creation outside traditional media channels. Although the CCP's former leaderships built a tightly controlled political framework over the vivid digital media and their users, the rise of We-media and the broader digital media environment presented significant governance challenges for the next generation of the CCP under Xi Jinping.

Since Xi Jinping assumed the position of general secretary in 2012, China has witnessed a dramatic shift in its media structure. Traditional media, once the central of Chinese information dissemination and control, has seen a gradual decline, influenced by both global trends in media consumption and specific policies enacted under Xi's administration. In parallel, We-media has surged, filling the void left by traditional outlets and transforming how information is disseminated and consumed in China. On the other hand, the considered slow-down in Chinese economic growth, particularly noticeable after 2010, and the increased public space for criticism under Hu's era were seen by the next generation of leadership under Xi Jinping as potential threats that could destabilise the Party's power. During the late years of Hu Jintao's leadership, political control over the media gradually increased. However, under Xi Jinping's tenure, this control has become more aggressive, particularly in the digital media sphere, with the government implementing stricter regulations and oversight.

Why did We-media flourish during a period of growing CCP political control? This chapter argues that the CCP's toleration and encouragement of We-media within the legitimacy framework is a strategic move to balance economic growth and political control, ensuring the Party's dominance in the digital age. The legitimacy framework, which will be introduced in this chapter, refers to the CCP's strategies to maintain its authority and justify its rule through various means, including economic performance, ideological appeal, and social stability.

To understand the rise of We-media despite the growing control under Xi Jinping, this chapter contains three main sections. The first section concentrates on interpreting Xi Jinping's strategy of We-media within the context of the CCP's political legitimacy. This involves exploring the foundational sources of the CCP's legitimacy, the specific challenges Xi faces in this realm, and how We-media's economic and ideological contributions are pivotal to the Party's enduring authority. By doing so, it explains *why* Xi's strategy aims to promote We-media's growth despite the increasing political oversight.

The second section focuses on Xi Jinping's model of We-media governance. It elucidates *how* Xi's strategy incentivises We-media's growth through supportive policies and incentives, fostering a vibrant digital economy and technological innovation. Simultaneously, it examines the stringent regulatory frameworks and control mechanisms employed to manage the political and social implications of We-media, ensuring that its expansion does not undermine social stability or challenge the Party's authority. Finally, this section also explores the evolving governance strategy that combines economic incentives with regulatory measures, illustrating the shift from previously distinct approaches to a more integrated model of monetary control. The last section gives a case of *Douyin* (Chinese version of TikTok 抖音), a leading We-media platform for short-form video content, to show how Xi's governance of We-media platforms supports the Party's needs through contributing economically and ideologically.

By juxtaposing the CCP's need for legitimacy with the practical governance of We-media and its implication, this chapter provides a comprehensive understanding of the

multifaceted strategies employed by Xi Jinping's administration. unravelling the nuanced dynamics that define the relationship between state power and digital media in contemporary China, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges inherent in this complex interplay. On the one hand, the integration of We-media fosters economic growth, technological advancements, and a diversified media landscape, which can bolster the Party's legitimacy by showcasing modernity and progress. On the other hand, the stringent control mechanisms necessary to maintain political stability and ideological conformity may stifle creativity and lead to public discontent, posing risks to social harmony and the Party's image.

4.1 Interpreting Xi Jinping's Strategy of We-media with the CCP's Legitimacy

As discussed in Chapter Three, since the beginning of China's reform era in the late 1970s, the country has experienced significant changes in media commercialisation and technological achievements. These changes have contributed to a more complex social, economic, and informational environment, along with the challenges to the ruling party. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the CCP has faced the dual challenge of fostering economic growth while maintaining strict political control. To address the challenges of the CCP's legitimacy in Xi Jinping's China and how Xi's strategy for We-media is reinforcing the Party's authority, this section begins by exploring the foundational sources of the CCP's legitimacy, then discussing the challenges to its legitimacy that Xi Jinping's government has experienced, as well as his response to legitimacy challenges accompanying the rise of We-media.

4.1.1 The CCP's original legitimacy sources

The CCP's sources of legitimacy and strategies for maintaining power have long been subjects of significant scholarly interest. Legitimacy, in a political context, refers to the recognised right to govern, where authority is deemed appropriate, justified, and accepted by the governed (Buchanan, 2002; Gilley, 2009). There are some commonly used definitions of legitimacy; for example, Lipset (1960, p. 77) defines legitimacy as "the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society". Beetham (2013)

defines the concept as “a power relationship justified in terms of people's beliefs”. He details three primary conditions for achieving legitimacy, namely, “conformity to established rules; the justifiability of the rules by reference to shared beliefs; and express consent of the subordinate” (Beetham, 2013, pp. 15-19). These definitions underscore the importance of both the normative and empirical aspects of legitimacy: what makes people believe in the ruler's right to govern, and how rulers maintain such belief.

In this regard, according to Guo (2003), two primary variables serve as the core of legitimacy for the CCP – the original justification and the utilitarian justification. The first one refers to the foundational basis of the authority's right to rule. It derived from Weber's analysis which includes three claims based on supernatural beliefs, charismatic authority of leaders, and legal-rational authority that stems from popular beliefs in the validity of legal statutes and objective rules (Weber, 2013). In the context of the CCP, the original justification for its rule historically included its role in leading the successful Chinese revolution, reflecting both charismatic and legal-rational bases. This revolutionary legitimacy was significantly solidified by Marxist-Leninist and *Mao Zedong Thought*, which provided an ideological framework for the CCP's governance (Guo, 2003; Zhu, 2011).

However, while original justification provides a foundational basis for the CCP's legitimacy, it alone is insufficient to maintain long-term political legitimacy. Over time, the CCP has had to adapt and evolve its strategies to address new challenges and changing dynamics within society. This adaptation has led to the development of a second core variable of legitimacy: the utilitarian justification, which revolves around the government's performance and its ability to “maintain people's belief in their ruling authority” (Guo, 2003, pp. 2-3). It is based on the practical outcomes of governance, particularly referring to how well the authority satisfies people's needs, such as material well-being or physical security (Yang & Zhao, 2018; Zhao, 2009). This perspective aligns with Bentham's principle of utility, which also suggests that the legitimacy of a government lies in its ability to maximise individual happiness and minimise pain (Bentham, 1970). This aspect of legitimacy is crucial, especially in modern governance, as it directly impacts the public's perception of the government's

effectiveness and right to rule, and is closely related to what political scientists often call “performance-based legitimacy” (Beetham, 2013; Huntington, 2006).

The Chinese Confucianists and the Legalists also agree that common people are primarily driven by profits and self-interests. This belief in the government’s role as a provider of benefits has enabled Chinese governments to take a more active role in managing the economy (Pye, 1988). For the CCP, economic performance has been a cornerstone of its utilitarian justification. Particularly after Mao’s rule, marked by the anti-rightist campaign, rising inner-party conflicts, and the disastrous Great Leap Famine, the CCP’s legitimacy began to wane; The chaotic Cultural Revolution, launched in 1966, further undermined CCP legitimacy despite Mao’s hopes for it to reinvigorate social support. By 1976, party leaders believed that the party’s popular standing had reached at an unprecedented low (Holbig & Gilley, 2010, p. 397). Just as Haggard and Kaufman (1995) state, “[a] regime with proper original justification can still suffer a legitimacy crisis if the regime cannot effectively satisfy people’s need” (p.149).

After the death of Mao, Deng Xiaoping quickly emerged as China’s paramount leader. He realised the decade-long political chaos and the failure to significantly improve living standards had weakened the Party’s legitimacy. Faced by this challenge, Deng decided to end the pursuit of class struggle and the mass movements, redirecting the people’s energy towards business and economic development. Since the reform and opening-up policies initiated in the late 1970s, China has experienced rapid economic growth, transforming from a predominantly agrarian society to a global industrial powerhouse. The CCP leverages this economic success as evidence of its effective governance and right to rule. The legitimacy of the CCP increasingly became tied to its ability to deliver “economic growth, improve living standards, and modernise the country” (Zhu, 2011). This pragmatic approach marked a significant shift from the ideological fervour of the Mao era to a pragmatic way. Under Deng Xiaoping's visionary leadership, China embarked on a path of "Reform and Opening Up", setting the stage for economic development and global engagement.

This momentum was carried forward by Jiang Zemin, whose era saw China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), heralding a new era of economic prosperity

and elevating China's status on the world stage. Regarding the source of ideological justification, Jiang Zemin introduced the theory of the "*Three Represents*", into the Communist Party Constitution, which broadened the CCP's ideological basis for legitimacy (Holbig, 2008; Wang, 2014). It claimed the party represented "the most advanced productive forces in China, the most advanced Chinese culture, and Chinese people's best interest" (Jiang, 2002). This allowed for entrepreneurs and private business owners, previously seen as the traditional "capitalist class" outside the party's base, to be included, reflecting the changing economic landscape of China (Wang, 2014). In so doing, the CCP explicitly committed itself to be a representative but elite governing institution and abandoned the characteristics of a revolutionary party.

Hu Jintao's presidency furthered these developments, with a focus on balanced development, social harmony, and environmental sustainability. Particularly, he introduced the concept of a "Harmonious Society (hexie shehui 和谐社会)", vowing to take a people-centred approach to address the social stratification that had emerged during the Jiang-Zhu administration and to promote social cohesion and populism (Zheng & Tok, 2007). This "all inclusive" ideological approach aligned with China's traditional normative view of social governance. The goal was to build shared beliefs and gain societal consent, creating a situation where both ruler and ruled agreed on the justification and lawfulness of CCP governance (Holbig, 2008, p. 30; Holbig & Gilley, 2010). However, the success of this new ideological indoctrination largely depends on the government's policy performance, rather than on its theoretical rhetoric. Under Hu, the CCP aimed to address the social and economic disparities that had widened during China's rapid development (Li, 2012). The legitimacy of the CCP was further linked to its ability to maintain social stability, reduce poverty, and manage the challenges of urbanisation and industrialisation. The pursuit of legitimacy was explicitly acknowledged in 2004 when the party conceded in a document following a high-level plenum that: "[t]he party's governing status is not congenital, nor is it something settled once and for all" (Resolution, 2004, 1154). Shambaugh (2008) describes the 2004 declaration as "probably the most important" party document since the 1978 plenum decision that initiated the reform movement (p.124).

Meanwhile, the development of media liberalisation under both Jiang and Hu introduced a new dynamism into Chinese public life, with the proliferation of digital platforms enabling unprecedented levels of information exchange and public engagement. However, this also led to significant challenges to the CCP's legitimacy, particularly in the face of economic fluctuations, widening inequality, and environmental concerns (Chen, 2012). Accordingly, in 2012, China stopped publishing figures on mass incidents in China when their number exceeded 200,000 (Wedeman, 2016). Under Xi Jinping, there has been a noticeable shift towards reasserting Party control over the media to manage the narrative and mitigate potential threats to legitimacy. By the time Xi Jinping assumed leadership in 2012, these issues had culminated in a complex matrix of social, economic, and political tensions that demanded decisive action.

4.1.2 Xi Jinping's Legitimacy Challenges

When Xi Jinping came to power, he adopted rather different strategies in state governance and development compared to his predecessors. This shift largely derived from the predicament of state legitimacy confronted by Xi and his leadership. This predicament, or at least potential risk, arises from multiple factors, including the slowdown of economic growth, the expansion of public space and external pressures.

Impotent Economic Performance

The primary challenge to Xi's legitimacy is the economic slowdown, given that economic performance serves as the primary legitimacy source for CCP. As discussed, the CCP's legitimacy is largely based on the performance-based legitimacy. This legitimacy source predominantly, but not exclusively, highlights how the state should promote material well-being for the public. From the perspective of economic factors, as Laliberté and Lantaigne (2007) point out, "economic performance represents the foundation of the CCP's continued ability to assert its authority". Since the late 1970s, market economics have been applied in China, contributing significantly to the CCP's economic performance-based legitimacy (Brady, 2017b; Dickson, 2016). The rapid economic growth under previous leaderships was not only a key source of legitimacy but also bolstered the CCP's claims of superior governance and facilitated substantial improvements in living standards (Laliberté & Lantaigne, 2007). This economic boom

created a social contract where the CCP's legitimacy was heavily tied to its ability to deliver continuous economic prosperity.

However, for Xi's leadership, this source of legitimacy has been shrinking in recent years in at least two ways. First, Chinese economic growth has slowed down in the two most recent decades. Statistics on Chinese GDP growth indicate that the growth rate declined substantially from 2012 to 2020, from 7.9% in 2012 to only 2.2% in 2020 (The World Bank, 2022). As the pace of growth has moderated under Xi, for the first time, the 14th *Five Year Plan*, adopted in March 2021 (Murphy, 2021), did not include precise growth targets for the overall economy. This marked a significant shift from previous plans and underscored the challenges in maintaining high growth rates.

The slowdown of economic growth can be attributed to multiple reasons, including the drying up of economic potential, the shrinkage of the labour pool, and the depression of the global economy, among others (Cai & Chan, 2009; Li et al., 2012; Suzuki, 2014). However, as growth has moderated under Xi, public expectations have not adjusted accordingly. Many citizens continue to expect the rapid improvements in living standards that characterised the earlier reform periods, leading to increased public expectation and scrutiny of the CCP's economic management and broader governance practices (Gilley, 2009; Holbig, 2008). Hence, when the economic growth rate no longer sustains its previous levels, the public begins to question the state's ability in economic governance and its political legitimacy. In this sense, from the perspective of the CCP and Xi Jinping, the economic slowdown has significantly challenged its political legitimacy.

Based on the economic slowdown, the second perspective reflecting the importance of economic performance is the widening economic inequality during the Xi era. One should note that the economic growth does not represent the entirety of the state's economic performance. Economic equality is another important dimension reflecting the state's capacity for economic governance (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005). In the case of China, the economic inequality has been a long-term socio-economic issue during periods of high-speed economic growth, whilst it has escalated to be more critical in the context of economic slowdown. Extensive literature shows that the economic inequality has exacerbated among different regions, social groups, and economic

sectors in recent years (Adrián Risso & Sánchez Carrera, 2012; Chen & Fleisher, 1996; Knight, 2014). The widening economic inequality has resulted in two challenges to state legitimacy in China. First, economic inequality, in return, encumbers the economic development as a whole. Second, it further deteriorates other social inequalities and causes social discontent towards state capacities for economic and social governance.

Rise of public criticism and dissent

The second challenge to Xi's legitimacy is the rise of public criticism and dissent. This phenomenon can be understood in three regards. First, the public criticism and discontent can be derived from the slowdown of economic growth and the state's "unperformed" economic governance, as discussed in the preceding section. Second, it has surged during Xi's period owing to the liberalisation reforms conducted by his predecessors. Throughout the opening and reform period, China experienced a relative liberalisation stage. Although the liberalisation primarily focused on the economic sector, its effects have inevitably spilled over into social dimensions.

The context of media, especially digital media, has provided a more open information environment for Chinese citizens, enabling them to receive information and participate in public affairs. In this regard, the expansion of digital media has introduced new dynamism into Chinese public life, enhancing information exchange and public engagement (Chen & Reese, 2015; Liu, 2021). While it has allowed for greater connectivity and the rapid dissemination of information, it has also created avenues for public dissent and criticism that might target the state's governance in dealing with particular public affairs. Issues like environmental concerns and corruption scandals often gain momentum on digital media platforms, resulting in heightened public scrutiny and criticism. (Chen & Reese, 2015; Ye et al., 2017).

More importantly, the development of digital media enables the criticisms and alternative viewpoints to spread more quickly and widely than ever before, challenging the CCP's ability to maintain a cohesive and controlled narrative (Repnikova, 2017; Yang, 2009). A typical example was the fire in Urumqi in 2022. Allegedly, the government's draconian lockdown policy encumbered the fire extinguishing in a residential building, which eventually caused the deaths and injuries (BBC News,

2022). This incident fuelled public disgruntlement and anger towards central government's lockdown policy and official narratives. During the covid-19 period, the official narrative and discourse regarding state policy on the pandemic was based on paternalistic nationalism: the government had done whatever it could to protect Chinese citizens, and it claimed that China's strategy in combating the pandemic was superior to that of the West (Molter & DiResta, 2020). However, when this Urumqi incident occurred, it soon became a trending topic on Chinese social media such as Sina *Weibo* and *Douyin*. Chinese netizens fiercely expressed their discontent and critical comments on the entire state policy design, and even questioned Xi Jinping's government legitimacy. A few days after, a nationwide protest erupted. Protesters in Shanghai explicitly called for Xi's deposition (BBC News, 2023). This case reflects that Xi's legitimacy has been seriously challenged by public criticisms. In hindsight, from the fire incident to the eventual nationwide protests, all public opinion expression and actual collective actions were facilitated via the means of digital media platforms. In this regard, the development of digital media is both a reflection of and a contribution to public criticism that challenges state legitimacy.

External pressures and domestic challenges

In addition to internal challenges, Xi Jinping's administration faces external pressures that impact the CCP's legitimacy. Xi's power centralisation and consolidation, his strongman politics, have invited criticism from both domestic and international societies. Particularly at the international level, disputes regarding human rights issues (Li, 2022) – such as the restrictions on freedoms in Tibet (Hennig), the treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang (Dooley, 2019), and the crackdown on protests in Hong Kong (Hui, 2020) – have drawn widespread condemnation. These issues are frequently highlighted in global media and are amplified and transmitted by digital media platforms. U.S. President Biden and German Foreign Minister Baerbock publicly called Xi Jinping a “dictator”, which has incurred huge debate on the internet (BBC News, 2023; The Guardian 2023).

In the meantime, Xi Jinping's political strategy is widely perceived as assertive, causing tension in the international order (Blackwill & Campbell, 2016); Geopolitical Monitor, 2024). A recent example occurred on October 22, 2024, when Russian President Vladimir Putin visited China. During the meeting, Xi Jinping and the Chinese

government reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening bilateral relations with Russia (Foreign Policy, 2024). This strategy has drawn extensive criticism given the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. These cases show that Xi Jinping's government has confronted huge external pressure.

More importantly, due to the advancement of the Chinese internet and digital media, external pressure can further fuel domestic challenges to Xi Jinping's political legitimacy. Although the Chinese government has imposed *the Great Firewall* to block domestic netizens from certain websites, such as *X* (Twitter's rebranded identity), *YouTube*, *Google*, on the global internet, advancements in internet and the pertinent digital techniques enable Chinese netizens to circumvent the firewall to gain access to the global internet world. One typical case is the use of "Virtual Private Networks" (VPNs), which are extensively used by Chinese netizens to access the international platforms (Roberts, 2018; Zhu, 2024, pp. 9-10). As a result, sensitive news and information can be accessed by these netizens. Some even disseminate the information on the domestic social media platforms using screenshots of these news items despite the risk of censorship.

In this case, the Chinese government is unable to completely keep Chinese netizens isolated from sensitive information. When external criticisms and challenges arise, this information eventually flows into the domestic internet and evolves into the challenges to state legitimacy. One case to attest this assessment is an influential X account "李老师不是李老师", which regularly posts social and political news about China, particularly content censored and filtered by the Chinese government domestically. This account originally had 1.6 million followers (now 1.4 million), many residing in mainland China. Since early 2024, the account holder has been told that many of his followers were interviewed and investigated by local police in China and were asked to cancel their subscriptions and stop following and commenting on this and similar accounts. For their personal safety, the account holder of "李老师不是李老师", actively asked followers to unsubscribe, causing the number of subscriptions to drop from 1.6 million to 1.4 million within a few days (BBC News, 2024). This case opportunely explicates how external pressure, digital media and Chinese netizens collectively construct challenges to Xi Jinping's political legitimacy.

These challenges underscore the complexities Xi faces in maintaining the CCP's legitimacy. The combination of economic slowdown and the dynamic, sometimes uncontrollable, nature of digital media creates a landscape where traditional pillars of CCP legitimacy are under constant pressure. In response to these challenges, Xi Jinping's administration has adopted a multifaceted strategy emphasising both continued economic development and ideological reinforcement. The following sections explore Xi Jinping's approach to navigating these legitimacy challenges, examining how he leverages economic and ideology policy to maintain the CCP's authority, with We-media playing a crucial role in promoting both economic growth and a unified ideological front supporting the Party's rule.

4.1.3 How Xi Jinping Responds to Legitimacy Challenges from the Rise of We-media

In response to the legitimacy challenges, Xi Jinping's strategy primarily focuses on two dimensions: economic and ideological. Overall, Xi's strategy aims to maintain the Chinese economy but without committing to further economic and political liberalisation (Economy, 2018; Lam, 1991). By doing so, it might not be able to eradicate all economic hardships, yet it at least could maintain the economic performance as the primary source of legitimacy. In addition, Xi emphasises the ideological building and nationalistic sentiments, which serve as supplementary sources of legitimacy, particularly when performance-based legitimacy is waning (Zhao, 2021).

Re-emphasis of economic performance legitimacy

As discussed, the economic performance legitimacy served as the primary source of state legitimacy for CCP's rule throughout the entire period of opening and reform. Although this source is decaying due to the slowdown of economic growth in recent years, economic development remains a critical component of Xi's strategy for maintaining CCP legitimacy. Since Xi has fortified the narrative that only under the "CCP leadership and rule" can China achieve a prosperous future and stable society, along with Chinese-characterised "modernisation" and 'development' (Zhao, 2016; Zeng, 2016b, p.123) , this perspective has significantly shaped the ideological and

policy discourse within the country. Yet, sustaining this Chinese-characterised “modernisation” and “development” is challenging without strong economic performance (Wu&Yun, 2018; Trinkwalder, 2020).

Since Xi came to power, he has actively engaged in economic planning and oversight. For example, since the *18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, Xi Jinping has personally helmed the *Central Leading Group on Finance and Economics* and presided over 16 meetings working on the development of China's economy in all directions, constantly opening up new horizons (Takeuchi, 2019). He has also proposed the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, setting the goal of “two hundred years”, which encompasses socialist modernisation and consolidates the Chinese nation's power to realise its dream. The basic connotation of the Chinese dream is “the country is rich and strong; the nation is revitalized and the people are happy” (Blackwill & Campbell, 2016). Besides these, Xi Jinping’s administration has implemented various measures to alleviate economic pressure and preserve his legitimacy, through various policies and initiatives such as the “*Dual Circulation Strategy* (双循环战略, shuang xunhuan zhanlue)”, “*New Normal*” (新常态, xin changtai), and “*one belt, one road*” (一带一路, yidai yilu), which aims to boost domestic consumption while continuing to engage in international trade (Hobson & Zhang, 2022).

Xi's governance reflects a pragmatic engagement with internet markets and technological advancement investments, as seen in the two landmark policies: “*Made in China 2025*” and “*Internet Plus Plan*”, both issued in 2015. The former aims to integrate the Internet economy with traditional industries to fuel economic growth, with the latter further elevating the digital economy as the key project to promote China’s economic transition (Hong, 2017; Miao, Jiang & Pang, 2021). These two policies have both emphasised the significance of promoting the Internet economy in China. Miao et al.'s (2021) extensive analysis of 358 national-level Chinese Internet laws and policies from 1994 to 2017 provides further evidence. Their findings indicate that, under Xi’s leadership from 2011 to 2017, there's been a surge in entrepreneurship and investment in the digital economy. The internet market, in particular, has been highlighted recurrently across policy documents. There's a concerted effort by Xi's

administration to herald the Internet as "a new driver of China's economic restructuring" (p.14).

Thus, while there are elements of change, there is also continuity in the CCP's approaches towards maintaining legitimacy through economic performance: engaging with international markets, investing in technological advancements, and maintaining economic growth are still vital for the party-state's legitimacy, especially in the perception of the Chinese public. The dynamism of these policies has galvanised participation in the digital market, leading to the advent of entities like We-media, which contribute to economic growth while also being harnessed for ideological reinforcement.

Ideological Re-emphasis and its impact on the media system

Some observers speculate that Xi's policies in the social dimension reflect his pursuit of alternative sources of legitimacy. Under his leadership, there is a noticeable re-emphasis on ideological conformity, both within the Party and the nation. Notably, ideology might serve as a substantially complementary source of regime legitimacy under Xi's governance, given the launch of several political and ideological education campaigns targeted at party members and the general Chinese public (Dreyer, 2012; Holbig, 2013; Zeng, 2014; Zeng, 2016b). These campaigns underline the importance of Marxism, and "*Xi Jinping Thought*" which has been enshrined in the party constitution, signalling a return to strong ideological roots.

This renewed emphasis on ideology immediately affected the whole Chinese media system. Although the CCP has always had a hand in media operations, as previous leaderships never stopped constraining and controlling media despite liberalisation, Xi's administration has taken this to new levels with a notable increase in explicit political control, covering the whole Chinese media system, from official media to commercial media and the digital media on the internet. In 2023, China ranked 179 out of 180 nations worldwide, with only North Korea having less press freedom (RSF, 2023).

Under Xi Jinping, the media are transitioning into becoming a more strategic instrument in the arsenal of Party control mechanisms. He perceives the media's role

for the party not just as being the absolute "*mouth and tongue*", as in the Mao era, or occupying the "oversight role" under Jiang and Hu, which balanced market dynamics with Party oversight. For Xi, the media is not merely a vehicle for economic growth facilitated by the market; rather, it is re-envisioned as a central instrument for consolidating power and enforcing ideological conformity. This shift reflects a strategic recalibration of the media's role—from a platform that once supported economic modernisation and a controlled public discourse to a stringent tool of governance and ideological enforcement, especially since he wants to be the single strong leader, like Mao, to solve social problems and international challenges without criticism (Mei & Wei, 2013; Li & Sparks, 2018; Schlesinger, 2016).

To achieve this aim, Xi's administration has re-emphasised the importance of media adherence to Party directives, aligning it closely with the core objectives of the Party's long-term strategic plans. In August 2013, during *the National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference*, Xi stated that journalism's priorities and tropes were far too important to be decided on by journalists, as sometimes "They speak without restraint, they are completely unscrupulous, they are cheered on by hostile forces". Moreover, attacks on socialism and on the nation should have no space on any medium, including "newspapers, periodicals and magazines, platforms and forums, meeting and conferences, films, television and radio stations, theatres...digital newspapers, mobile television, mobile media, mobile text messaging, WeChat, Weibo, blogs, microblogs, forums and other such new media" (Xi, 2013).

These restrictions reflect a key fact that the state controlling strategy put lots of emphasis specifically on media practitioners' activities across the whole media system. Some scholars like Repnikova (2018) see it as a demand for "absolute loyalty" from media practitioners (pp.210) and designed to promote "mandatory indoctrination" among Chinese journalists (Li & Sparks, 2018, pp.421). This is different compared to the attitude towards journalists in Mao's era that admonished journalists to produce news "through gentle persuasion", which was more about guiding journalists to propagate socialist values indirectly, with a certain paternalistic tone in messaging, aiming to educate and shape public opinion rather than overtly coerce it (Lam, 1991). Under Xi Jinping, the approach to media control has become more overt and uncompromising. He demands that journalists should "speak for the party's will and its

propositions” (Xinhua, 2016), not only adhere to Party directives but actively participate in promoting and defending the Party's policies. This shift signifies a hardline stance where the media is expected to be an unequivocal mouthpiece of the state.

This is also different compared to Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao’s requirement of media to “monitor some problems and issues in society” (Xinhua News, 2003), although in many cases, limited their reports to being depoliticised (Brady, 2017 pp.133). The media approach of Jiang and Hu, while restrictive, still allowed for a semblance of the media's traditional role as society’s watchdog, albeit heavily moderated. However, under Xi Jinping, media control has become significantly stricter, with the introduction of re-education programmes and a more systematic, rigorous indoctrination process. These measures aim not just to control but to fundamentally reshape the journalistic profession, thoroughly aligning it with Marxist ideals and the Party’s vision. Thus, under Xi, the media's role extends into several domains: it serves as a bulwark against perceived threats to party unity, a mechanism for propagating the Party's narrative, and a tool for the social management of public opinion. The intensive use of media to support Xi’s anti-corruption campaign, for instance, not only purges the Party of internal dissent but also reinforces Xi’s image as a strong, incorruptible leader committed to cleansing the Party and improving governance, thus enhancing public confidence in their governance (Fu, 2015). This approach helps emerging leaders to secure loyalty from various political factions and strengthen their regime’s legitimacy.

However, addressing these challenges requires not only economic management but also sophisticated strategies to manage and influence public discourse in the digital age. The following specifically focuses on Xi Jinping’s model of We-media governance, and discusses how Xi Jinping’s government deals with the rise of We-media and how We-media’s economic and ideological implications contribute to the current CCP leadership’s legitimacy.

4.2 Xi Jinping’s Model of We-media Governance

As discussed, legitimacy has been always the focal point of CCP state governance and Xi is encountering legitimacy challenges from multiple facets. Xi's governance on We-media in China is largely based upon the concerns over legitimacy. Marco Colino (2022) states that "China's rulers are constantly navigating between the Scylla and Charybdis of growth and control" (p.237). This metaphor accurately describes the digital dilemma of the CCP's dual approach to the rise of We-media to maintain the balance between two challenging extremes: the pursuit of economic growth (*Scylla*) and the need for control or stability (*Charybdis*). While too much emphasis on rapid growth can lead to instability or unsustainable practices, too much control can stifle innovation and expansion. How to maintain the balance between economic stimulation and stringent controls to shape the digital landscape in accordance with the goals and stability of the CCP has always been a significant task for authoritarian rulers (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011).

Xi Jinping's model of We-media governance in China exemplifies a nuanced approach to managing the opportunities and challenges posed by the rise of digital media in current China. It employs a sophisticated way in managing the rapid growth and potential disruptions associated with We-media in China. On the one hand, Xi's government has prioritised the development of its digital economy as a key driver of its broader economic strategy. We-media platforms like social media, live streaming and video-sharing platforms contribute significantly through advertising revenue, e-commerce, job opportunities, and promoting consumer engagement. These platforms are not just business enterprises; they are also seen as tools for technological advancement and global economic competitiveness. Recognising the growing importance and influence of the We-media, Xi's administration implements policies and supports encouraging the development and commercialisation of these platforms.

On the other hand, the Party maintains a cautious stance, implementing rigorous regulatory frameworks to manage the political and social implications of We-media, ensuring that this growth does not compromise social stability or challenge the party's authority; meanwhile, the rise of We-media can play the propaganda role to help disseminate approved political narratives. These include, for example, policies mandating online content and real-name registration. Additionally, under Xi Jinping, a critical component of Xi Jinping's strategy to "grow and control" We-media involves

strategic cooperation with major digital media companies like *Tencent*, *Sina*, and *ByteDance*. These tech giants provide various media platforms and digital tools for We-media to create, delivery and monetise their UGC content. To some extent, they are often the first and most direct line of regulation and management of We-media. This collaboration between them and the government is multifaceted, involving economic support, regulatory compliance, and technological advancements. Thus, Xi's We-media strategy can be encapsulated in three aspects: 1) state stimulation of We-media, 2) state control of We-media, and 3) strategic cooperation with the digital media companies. In so doing, Xi's strategy ultimately aims to contribute to the state's legitimacy through the We-media governance.

4.2.1 State stimulation of We-media

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the state has actively promoted a growing digital economy. We-media are recognised as vital components of this economy, playing a significant role in fostering innovation and economic development (Song, 2015). To maintain this aim, the government has implemented a pragmatic approach with technological infrastructure investments, and economic policies with financial supports to create a supportive environment for We-media's growth.

Technological and Financial Supports

As mentioned in previous chapters, different leaders of the Chinese government have put considerable effort into promoting the development of internet technological infrastructure, and Xi Jinping's government is doing the same. In 2015, Xi's government endorsed policies like the "*Internet Plus*" initiative and "*Made in China 2025*", which aimed to upgrade the internet technologies and further develop the technological infrastructure. These policies have been instrumental in promoting the growth of We-media in China by driving technological advancements and providing economic incentives. For example, the "*Internet Plus*" initiative integrates internet technologies with traditional industries, encouraging the adoption of digital tools and fostering economic modernisation and innovation. "*Made in China 2025*" focuses on upgrading manufacturing capabilities through advanced technologies like 5G, AI and big data, which enhance We-media platforms' ability to deliver personalised content and engage users (Ding, 2021). Additionally, financial subsidies for the Chinese government further supported their development. In 2017, the government established

a 100 billion CNY fund for internet infrastructure investments, which brought both We-media and their audiences high speed web connection so that they can enjoy more digital applications and services (Gao, 2020; Yu, 2017; Qiu, 2018).

With the growing scale of investments flowing into this field, by mid-2017, China's internet penetration rate had reached 54.3%, with 751 million individuals online, and mobile internet users had risen to 724 million, accounting for 96.3% of the online demographic. This widespread mobile connectivity underpinned a new paradigm of content consumption, with a remarkable 596 million individuals accessing news via mobile devices (CNNIC, 2017). These numbers kept increasing. As of June 2019, the number of internet users in China had reached 854 million, with an internet penetration rate exceeding 60% for the first time, reaching 61.2%. The number of mobile internet users in China reached 847 million, with 99.1% of internet users accessing the internet via mobile phones. The number of online news users in China reached 686 million, an increase of 11.14 million compared to the end of 2018, accounting for 80.3% of all internet users (CINIC, 2019). Furthermore, by June 2023, there were 1.079 billion internet users and 1.03 billion social media users, both ranking in first place in worldwide (Xinhua News, 2023; Statista, 2023).

Tax Policies and Benefits

Besides these direct financial supports to tech sectors and digital enterprises, the Chinese government has offered preferential tax rates for small and micro-sized enterprises (SMEs) from January 1, 2022 to December 31, 2027 (Gov.cn, 2022), which help to reduce operational costs for We-media start-ups. Accordingly, SMEs in China are generally defined based on specific criteria related to the number of employees, annual revenue, and total assets. These criteria can vary across different industries. In the digital media sector, micro-sized enterprises typically have fewer than 10 employees or annual revenue under 1 million CNY, while small enterprises have 10-100 employees or annual revenue between 1 million and 10 million CNY (NBS, 2017). As introduced in chapter 3, We-media are normally operated by individuals or small groups. We-media start-ups, in this project, refers to a small number of employees or small teams. By fitting the criteria for SMEs in China, they benefit significantly from government policies designed to stimulate growth.

Specifically, for We-media businesses, “the portion of their annual taxable income that exceeds 1 million CNY but does not exceed 3 million CNY will be taxed at a rate of 20%, rather than the standard corporate tax rate of 25%” (Gov.cn, 2022). In other words, these We-media start-ups can save 5% tax fee. By providing a reduced tax rate for a specified range of income, the government aims to reduce the tax burden on their businesses, and make it more attractive for We-media content creators to formalise their operations as registered start-ups rather than individuals. This not only legitimises their businesses but also provides them with financial savings that can be reinvested into their growth and content creation.

It is notable that, in the last decade, there has been a substantial increase in registered We-media start-ups. According to the statistics from *Qichacha* (企查查), a comprehensive database of Chinese private and public companies, the number of registered We-media start-ups has escalated over the years. Specifically, the number of registered We-media start-ups was only 313 in 2014, rising to surpass 1,000 in 2017, and further dramatically increased to 7,033 by 2022. Even more recently, the number reached 7,408 in 2023 (*Qichacha*, 2023) (table 4.1 as following).

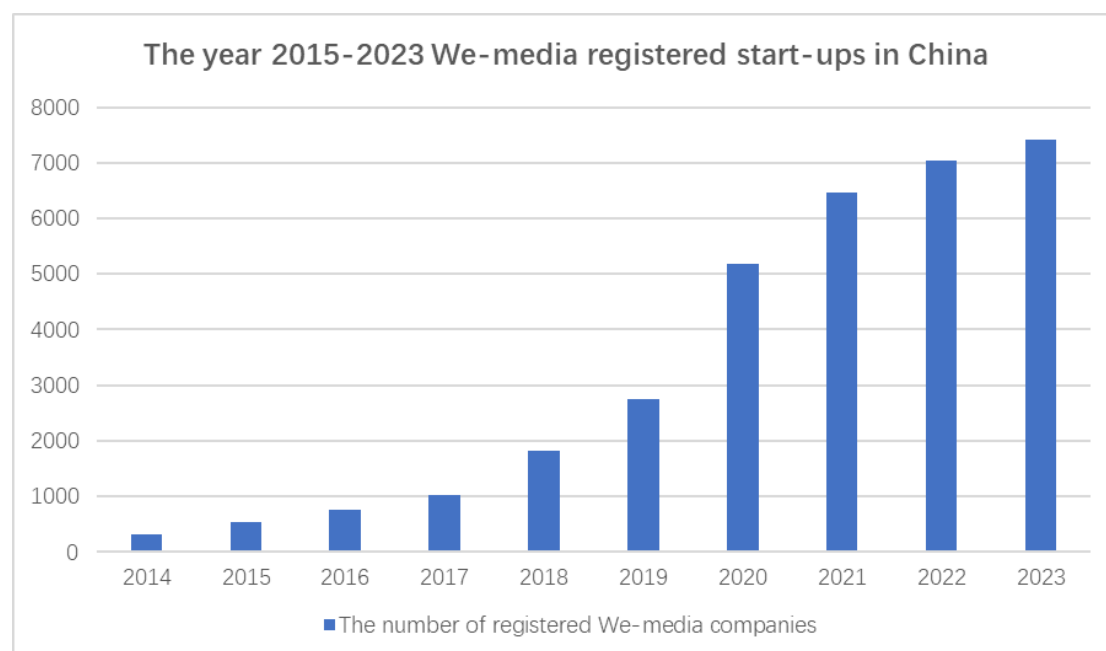


Table 4.1: For the years 2014-2023 We-media registered start-ups in China (data sourced from: Qichacha, 2023)

This direct state-sponsored technological groundwork and a considerable amount of financing provided a catalyst for the rapid ascent of We-media, providing a conducive environment for We-media to flourish (Xiao, 2016; Zhang & Shang, 2016).

4.2.2 State Control of We-media

Alongside economic encouragement, Xi Jinping's government implements rigorous controls over We-media to prevent any potential destabilising effects. The purposes of tightening control can be understood at least in two regards. First, Xi's control aims to counterbalance the potential increase of civil society power, which resulted from the expansion of We-media under the state stimulation framework. By managing the influence of We-media, the government seeks to prevent independent civil groups from gaining too much power and influence. Second, Xi's governance aims to embed its own political discourse and narratives within We-media content. This ensures that the We-media supports the Party's ideology and objectives, reinforcing state legitimacy. Central to this approach is the concept of "cyber sovereignty", which asserts China's right to govern its own cyberspace and safeguard it from external influences and internal threats. This concept not only emphasises the control of information within China's borders but also reflects the broader goal of enhancing national security and protecting state interests in the digital age. Through cyber sovereignty, the government aims to maintain the integrity and security of its digital infrastructure, ensuring that the internet serves the interests of the CCP (Economy, 2018).

To enforce this control, the government employs several measures, from three main perspectives: what content should be censored, what can be published, and who should be censored.

What Content Should Be Censored: Updated Institutional Framework

Although the Chinese government has long been concerned over internet censorship, under Xi, this control has intensified (Shu, 2017; Lee, 2017). At the institutional level, the Party's primary avenue for influencing information control is through *the* CCP Propaganda Department (CCPPD). The CCPPD monitors and issues directives on both "what content should be censored" and "what types of content should be disseminated across all media in China", including the internet, mobile phones, print

publications, radio, televisions, art, and education materials used in schools or vocational training (Shambaugh, 2007).

But to focus specifically on regulating the internet content, in 2011, the State Internet Information Office was established to regulate content on the Internet (Buckley, 2011). In 2013, Xi Jinping upgraded this Office into a new, separate administration for regulating internet content and cyberspace, called the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), run by the Central Cybersecurity and Informatization Leading Small Group and personally chaired by Xi Jinping (People's Daily, 2013; Lam, 2015). The CAC acts as the top body of policy formulation and implementation to manage internet-related issues and streamline internet control (Alshabah, 2016). It enforces stricter censorship online, including shutting down websites that do not comply with censorship regulations, and increasing the prevalence of the government's perspective online by digitising propaganda. In particular, this CAC closely monitors the activities of high-profile journalists, activists, bloggers and active users on digital media (Robert, 2017, p.107).

“What can be published”: Regulation of Published Content

Further, the government has set regulations on “what can be published”. On 4 Feb 2016, the “Provisions on the Administration of Online Publishing Services” (网络出版服务管理规定) (The Provisions, 2016) were jointly issued by the State Administration of Press, Publications, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT). The provisions were considered as the first regulations related to the online publishing services, as they define “what can be published online”, including:

- “1) original digitised works such as knowledgeable and thoughtful texts, pictures, maps, games, animation, and audio and video readings in literature, art, science and other fields; (2) digitised works of which the content is consistent with those in published books, newspapers, periodicals, audio and video recordings, and electronic publications, among others; (3) digitised works such as online literature databases formed in such manners as selecting, compiling and collecting the

aforesaid works; and (4) other types of digitised works recognised by the SAPPRFT.” (The Provisions, 2016)

According to this Provision, almost all digital content produced by We-media falls under these regulations.

Who Should Be Censored: Real-name Registration

These regulations and censorship are facilitated by surveillance tools, such as requiring people to register for websites with their real name, and requiring internet service providers and digital media companies to keep records of users' activities. In December 2012, the 30th Session of the Standing Committee of the Eleventh National People's Congress passed an important internet regulation named “*Decision of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on Strengthening Information Protection on Networks*” (The Decision 2012). The decision (2012) explicitly stipulates that the real identity (shiminzhi 实名制) is required from all users when they subscribe to the internet access services. This decision is further enhanced by the law “*Interim Provisions on the Administration of the Development of Public Information Services Provided through Instant Messaging Tool* (即时通信工具公众信息服务发展管理暂行规定)” published in 2014. This law is considered the first directed towards We-media (Zhang & Gu, 2016). It required all We-media content creators to use their real names and verify their identity to register their accounts with instant messaging tool service providers like *WeChat* and *Sina Weibo* (ibid.). Additionally, their personal information must be filed and recorded in relevant governmental departments (Huang, 2022). These regulations significantly impact We-media by controlling who can publish online.

Through stringent censorship laws, close monitoring of online activities, and real-name registration policies, Xi Jinping's government controls “what content should be censored”, “what content can be published” and “who should be censored”, ensuring that the growth of We-media does not lead to social instability or challenge the CCP's authority. These measures, facilitated by institutions like the CAC, reflect the government's commitment to maintaining control over public discourse in the digital age. The cooperation with social media platforms further enhances the government's

ability to manage and regulate We-media effectively, ensuring that technological innovation and public engagement are balanced with strict content oversight.

4.2.3 Government Cooperation with Social Media Platforms to Foster We-media

One outstanding feature of Xi's governance is reflected by the cooperation between the state and media platforms. Notably, between the state and We-media, there are critical intermediaries: social media platforms, which serve as the primary conduits for We-media activities. These platforms are more than just social networks; they are the foundational tools that We-media rely on to create content, engage audiences, distribute content, and generate revenue. Recognising their importance, the Chinese government strategically cooperates with them by promoting technological innovation and public engagement, on one hand, while enforcing strict content controls and surveillance, on the other. Following the government's lead, these social media giants implement strategies to promote the growth of We-media, while censoring their content. From the perspective of the state control, cooperating with the platform could bring various benefits. Comparing with state direct control, the platforms are more professional and specialised in navigating between media stimulation and media censorship. Tencent, for example, one of the largest multimedia companies in the world, operates several social media platforms, such as *Tencent Weibo* (腾讯微博) and *WeChat*, as introduced before. The Chinese government considers Tencent as "one of its national champion corporations" (Curtis & Klaus, 2024, pp. 156-157). *Tencent's* CEO, Ma Huateng, is a deputy to the 5th Shenzhen Municipal People's Congress and served in the 12th National People's Congress (The State Council, 2016). In August 2019, *Tencent* collaborated with the Guangdong Propaganda Department of the CCP and *the People's Daily* to build "patriotic" videogames. Additionally, it designed a special homepage featuring Xi Jinping's image to celebrate 70 years of Communist rule (Huang, 2019). According to a December 2020 Foreign Policy article, a former senior official of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) stated that Tencent received funding from the Ministry of State Security early on in its foundation as a "seed investment" to build the Great Firewall and monitoring technology, despite Tencent denying these claims (Dorfman, 2020).

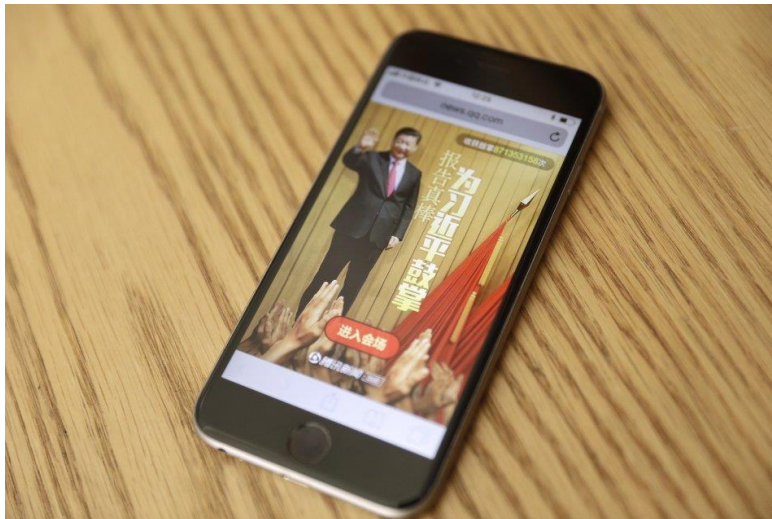


Figure 4.1 Photo from Bloomberg UK. The front page of Tencent celebrating 70 years of Communist rule in China (Huang, 2019).

Initiatives to Encourage We-media

Inspired by the government's goal to achieve a vibrant digital media landscape, many digital media enterprises and social platforms have rolled out incentives, such as providing subsidies, journalistic skills training and free editing services, to encourage more people to join the We-media workforce. Leading Chinese social media platforms like *Sina Weibo*, *WeChat*, and *Douyin* are spearheading this initiative, providing skills training courses for people who want to start We-media careers (AsiaPac, 2021; TheTribeChina, 2021; Chinaparadigm, 2021). The courses are designed at different levels for both beginners and professionals, covering various topics such as using We-media for business and producing media content that attracts audiences (IE-18, 2022). An interviewee from my fieldwork working for *WeChat* introduced that, for people who are interested in starting their own We-media accounts on WeChat public platforms, the background system will automatically send them push notifications. These alerts will guide them on platform utilisation and offer access to an array of training courses. While a majority of this content is freely accessible, some specialised courses come with a nominal fee. The information they provide contains various topics, for example, teaching people how to use We-media for business, and how to produce media content that attracts audiences (IE-18, 2022).

Additionally, major digital media platforms such as *Douyin*, *Today Toutiao* (今日头条), *Tencent* (腾讯), *UC browser* and *Bai Jiahao* (百家号) offered financial incentives and reward programmes for We-media content creators. One typical case was Tencent's "Mangzhong Project (芒种计划)" which launched on March 1, 2016, aiming to support independent We-media creators in producing original content. The term "Mangzhong" in Chinese means: as long as you sow seeds full of hope and cultivate them carefully, you will surely reap the most fruitful fruits. This initiative was part of Tencent's broader strategy to enhance the content ecosystem within its platforms, particularly focusing on high-quality, original digital content creation. In particular, the project allocated 200 million CNY in subsidies to encourage and assist registered independent content creators. Moreover, their content can be distributed through Tencent Group's multimedia platforms, including *Tiantian Kuaibao* (天天快报), *Tencent News* app (腾讯新闻客户端), *WeChat News* (微信新闻), and *QQ News* (手机 QQ 新闻), providing more exposure and web traffic. Additionally, all advertising revenue from the content went entirely to We-media content creators (Tencent, 2016).

On February 28, 2017, Tencent launched "Mangzhong Project 2.0". This updated plan, expanding the initiative to include more multimedia platforms, includes Tencent Video and QQ Web search engine, to provide more web traffic and exposure to We-media. It is said by the We-media content creator "Jing Bingtang (精兵堂)" that this project brought him a daily readership of 861,000. In addition, the Mangzhong Project 2.0 allocated 1 billion CNY in subsidies to support We-media content creation (Tencent News, 2017). In particular, this updated project added a minimum income guarantee policy: "providing a monthly income of 10,000 CNY guaranteed minimum subsidy for high-quality individual creators with sustainable content production capabilities; and individual creators in various vertical segments who are novel, interesting, distinctive, or have unique knowledge value, providing a monthly income guarantee subsidy of 5,000 CNY". However, to register for this project, individual We-media should have "no credit score record, and the *Penguin index health score* must be greater than 90 points" (Tencent, 2017). In 2017, both *UC browser* and *Today Toutiao* offered over 1 billion CNY to encourage We-media's content production, and in 2020, *Douyin* provided the same support, adding another 1 billion to support We-media. Such

incentives significantly bolstered the spirits of newcomers in the We-media industry, driving them to consistently churn out high-quality content (Li, 2020).

Social Media Credit Scoring Systems

It is worth mentioning that *WeChat* of *Tencent* has implemented a “credit scoring system” for its video and live streaming platform users. This system assigns an initial score of 100 points to each user. Accounts with scores under 95 are considered “low credit,” and may face penalties. For example, scores from 70-95 will have limited exposure to the We-media content in a different range. Scores from 65-30 will receive a temporary ban ranging from 3 to 30 days, and if the score falls to zero, the account will be forever banned (Paper, 2021a). If the credit points are deducted, users must maintain a record free of violations for 90 days for their credit score to recover.

Different violations lead to different deductions. The following table 4.2 provides details of the penalty points for various violations on *WeChat* video platform:

Reasons for Disposition	Violation Deduction Points	Reasons for Disposition	Violation Deduction Points
Violation of Regulations	40 points	Political Sensitivity	10 points
Illegal Violations	20 points	Pornographic Violations	20 points
Suspicious, False, or Exaggerated Content	10 points	Illegal or Sensitive Content	5 points
Vulgar or Excessive Exposure	5 points	Excessive Marketing or Harassment	5 points
Illegal Inducement	5 points	Publishing Risky Content Without Qualification	5 points
Abuse of Functions	5 points	Data Violations	5 points

Table 4.2: a summary of the violations and the corresponding points deducted in Tencent's video/live streaming credit points system. (Resource from WeChat video app, video account security centre, rule learning, accessed on 23, November, 2023)

Similar credit score systems also are adopted by *Sina Weibo* and *Douyin* (Douyin, 2023; Sina, 2020). These credit score systems have a direct controlling effect on We-media content creators who rely on exposure and web traffic for their businesses, which in turn impacts their income. When their credit scores are reduced it triggers corresponding penalties such as banning their accounts or reducing account recommendations. Since credit score recovery requires maintaining a violation-free record for 90 days, any deduction can have long-term negative effects on the We-media accounts. Therefore, these systems force We-media content creators to be very careful to follow platform rules to avoid violations and the resulting losses.

Government Regulations and Enforcement to maintain the cooperation

As mentioned, the Chinese government has long emphasised the responsibility of digital media companies, in particular those tech giants with social media platforms, such as *Tencent*, *Sina*, and *ByteDance*, to manage and censor their users. But under Hu and Jiang, it mostly related to provision of official guidelines or documents. However, under Xi's leadership, these requirements have been further enhanced and codified into law.

In 2012, the first year of Xi Jinping's leadership, the CCPD officially required major social media websites, including Sina, Tencent, Sohu, NetEase and other websites with microblogs, to establish Party Organisations into their management, in order to directly supervise and guide their activities (Shen, 2012). Meantime, it issued censorship directives to social media companies, instructing them to filter or remove content related to sensitive topics such as collective action, activism, or criticism of the state (Cairns & Carlson, 2016; Miller, 2017; Knockel, Ruan & Crete-Nishihata, 2017). Under its instruction, digital platforms such as *Sina*, *Baidu* and *Yahoo* employ both automated keyword filtering and manual content review processes to comply with these directives, demonstrating a sophisticated system of decentralised content control (Ng, 2013; Knockel et al. 2015).

In response to a government decision, in the same year, the largest social media platform, *Sina Weibo*, introduced their own community standards to align with government expectations. It issued three regulations in 2012, namely, “Sina Weibo Community Convention (Trial)”, “Community Management Regulations (Trial)” and the “Community Committee System (Trial)”. In particular, Article.18 of Sina Weibo Community Convention lists nine types of information that users are not allowed to publish on their platforms as they endanger national and social security, including that which “harms the unity, sovereignty, or territorial integrity of the nation”, “spreads rumours, disrupts social order, and destroys societal stability” and that “calls for disruption of social order through illegal gatherings, formation of organisations, protests, demonstrations, mass gatherings and assemblies.” (Sina Weibo Community Convention, 2012, Art.18).

After the Sina regulations were published online, they received more than 54,000 comments (Rudolph, 2012). Some Sina Weibo users publicly showed their support for this document, with some claiming that these rules would help to manage the growing proliferation of rumours and obscene content on the platform (Chin, 2012). However, some held the opposite opinion: for example, Pan Shiyi, the Chairman of SOHO China, with more than 18 million followers on Sina Weibo, said it was good to have rules for the online community but added a question: “Does this mean there won’t be any more arbitrary take-downs?” (Pan, 2012). Many even point out that Sina’s new regulations have deliberately taken advantage of the vagueness of state documents as the definitions of disallowed content can reach any corner of the post in given circumstances (Sun, 2012).

Furthermore, the enactment of the *Cyber Security Law* (CSL) in 2017 marked a significant step in regulating social media platforms, requiring them to propagate state-approved news and adhere to strict internet regulations. Compliance with these regulations is essential for platforms to operate, necessitating cooperation in censoring sensitive political, social, and religious content. Specifically, CSL put the security obligations on digital media companies to reveal the real names of users on their websites, especially on their forums and chat groups, and monitor user-generated content on their platforms, including online comments for information that is “prohibited from being published or transmitted by laws or administrative regulations” (Creemers,

2019; Parasol, 2018). It requires network operators to store selected data within China and allows Chinese authorities to conduct spot-checks on a company's network operations (Wagner, 2017). This legislation reflects the more restrictive and pinpointed regulation under Xi Jinping's governance, as it imposes responsibility further down the chain from media and technology companies, putting culpability onto individual users (Lindsay et al., 2015).

Meanwhile, major social media platforms like Sina Weibo have implemented their own community standards in response to government regulations, aligning with state expectations and filtering sensitive content (Rudolph, 2012; Chin, 2012; Sun, 2012). They have invested a lot in increasing their manpower and technologies to monitor and filter the information hosted on their platforms in order to conform to the government's requirements. Failure to comply may lead to fines or the revocation of operating licences. To filter "inappropriate content" on their websites, the digital media companies need to conduct mixed censorship, combining human reviews and machine filtering which helps with pre-emptive and post-hoc content removal, which has been a vast expense (ONI, pp.48). To prevent receiving penalties for hosting any form of illegal content, many Internet companies even build special departments with employees "whose sole job is to police users and censor content" (MacKinnon, 2011, 38). For example, Sina set up a human monitoring team with more than 1000 employees (Jiang, 2016; Lam, 2017).

As mentioned in Chapter Three, most regulations and guidelines from the Party are typically vague. This vagueness leaves room for the government to interfere with companies' operations as needed, often leading to over-censorship, described by Perry Link as an "anaconda in the chandelier" (Link, 2002). This purposeful vagueness has been a fundamental tool in Chinese Communist censorship for decades, pressuring individuals to curtail a wider range of activities and allowing arbitrary targeting. A quintessential case came in 2018 when many Sina Weibo accounts were suspended, under the state order of "clean up 'wrong-oriented' and 'vulgar' information" (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

The Chinese government's approach to managing We-media and social media platforms is a nuanced blend of promotion and control, reflecting its broader goals of

fostering economic innovation and maintaining social stability. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, significant investments in technological infrastructure and supportive economic policies have created a fertile environment for the growth of We-media. Meanwhile, these domestic social media platforms play a crucial intermediary role, enabling We-media activities while adhering to state directives. These platforms support content creators through financial incentives and training programmes, promoting a vibrant digital media landscape. However, they also implement stringent content controls and monitoring systems to comply with government regulations, reflecting the delicate balance between encouraging digital innovation and enforcing state censorship.

Furthermore, compared to the “selective online censorship” under Hu Jintao’s leadership (King et al., 2013), State control of online content under Xi Jinping has been explicitly strengthened. The government has developed a system of internet regulations that hold many entities and individuals accountable for access to the internet (Cullen & Choy, 2004, p. 329), while requiring social media platforms to take responsibility for internet content filtering and regulating their service users. This approach decentralised regulation by shifting the responsibility for content control away from the government itself (Knockel et al., 2015, p. 6; Li, 2004; MacKinnon, 2013), which creates multiple layers of control ensuring censorship of that information on cyberspace.

4.3 How We-media Contribute to State Legitimacy under Xi Jinping’s Governance

As discussed, Xi’s governance has significantly impacted the landscape of We-media in China. Financial subsidies, preferential tax rates, and infrastructure investments have lowered the barriers to entry for We-media start-ups, fostering a vibrant digital ecosystem. In the meantime, We-media, has not only evolved but also become an essential tool for reinforcing state legitimacy. This section focuses on the evolution of We-media, highlighting its economic growth, market influence, and its contribution to the economic and ideological goals of the state.

4.3.1 Economic Contributions

As discussed, the government conceives the digital economy could be a vital tool to boost China's economy. Hence, it has implemented various measures to stimulate the development of We-media. Under the state stimulation framework, We-media has expanded significantly in the sense of market size and job creation. All these suggest the function of a government stimulation scheme and the economic success of We-media. By and large, the We-media has fulfilled the role of contributor to the state's legitimacy.

We-media Market Size Expansion

In the last decade, China's digital marketing sector has seen explosive growth. According to the statistics from the *State Information Centre* (SIC), by 2020, China's media industry surpassed 2 trillion CNY in scale, with digital media accounting for 80% of the market (SIC, 2020). The market size of China's digital marketing expanded from 193.7 billion CNY in 2015 to 392 billion CNY in 2020, further increasing to 455 billion CNY in 2021. This accounted for 39.8% of China's GDP in that year. Within this burgeoning sector, We-media's share has been steadily increased, from 15.28% in 2015 to 36.8% in 2020, and a significant 56.7% in 2021 (CAICT, 2022). In particular, in 2015, the We-media market was valued at 2.95 billion CNY. By 2019, the figure had skyrocketed to 159.3 billion CNY. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further accelerated this growth, as people were forced indoors, exponentially increasing their internet dependency. This shift provided an inadvertent boost to the growth of the We-media market, with annual marketing revenues exceeding 200 billion CNY in 2020. By 2021, the market valuation had soared beyond 258 billion CNY (Insight and Info, 2021) (Figure 4.2 as following).

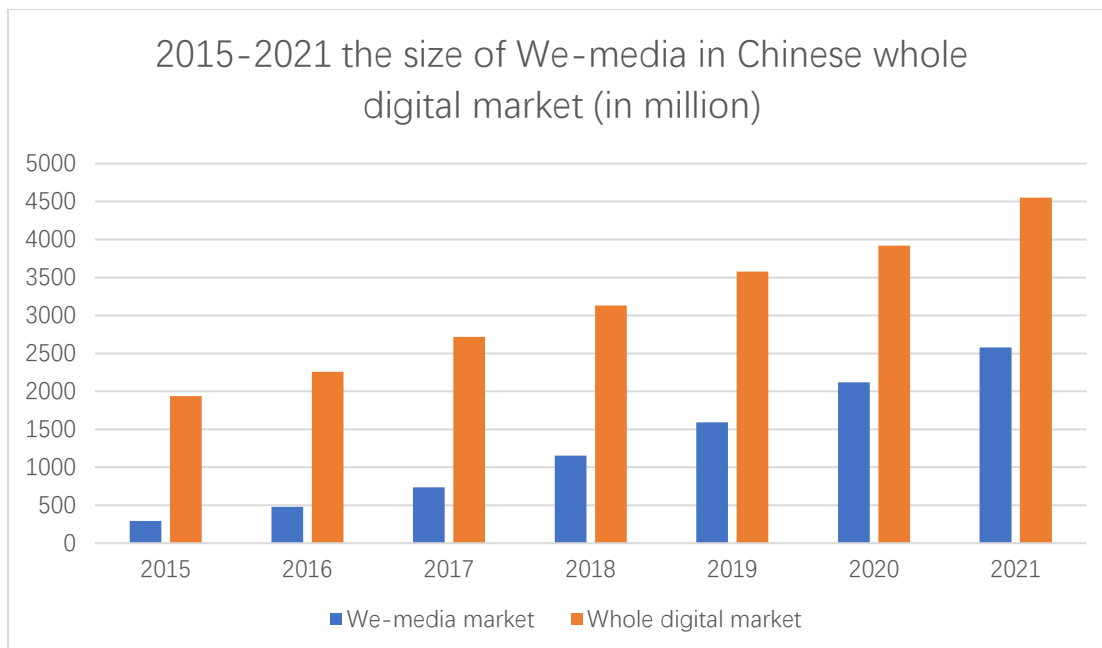


Figure 4.2: 2015-2021 the size of We-media in Chinese whole digital market

This rapid expansion highlights We-media's growing dominance and its critical role in China's digital economy. In parallel with its market dominance, the number of We-media users grew dramatically. By 2019, it had reached 460 million, accounting for 47.6% of the total number of internet users in the country (People's Daily, 2023). According to Tang et al. (2020)'s estimation, currently approximately 80% of Chinese internet users prefer We-media as the major channel to get news content and information consumption.

It is notable that advertising revenue is considered as the primary source of We-media income, including PR advertising and revenue sharing from traffic ads. Accordingly, the total value of internet advertising reached around 15.24 billion CNY in 2015, while social media advertising accounted for 2.032 billion CNY (Xu, 2015), one third of which belonged to We-media (ASKCI, 2020). In 2022, the market size of China's PR advertising was approximately 100.7 billion CNY, with about half directly related to We-media, amounting to around 50.4 billion CNY. Taking *Tencent* as an example, *Tencent's* We-media platforms include *WeChat Official Accounts* and *Video Accounts*. In 2022, *Tencent's* total advertising revenue was 92.1 billion CNY, with around 15% related to *WeChat Official Accounts*, which is approximately 13.8 billion CNY. *WeChat Official Accounts'* traffic click ads have a 30/70 revenue split, where We-media content creators receive 70%, equating to about 32.2 billion CNY. Additionally, direct user

rewards and paid reading income add roughly 3 billion CNY, meaning We-media creators earn approximately 85.6 billion yuan annually from *WeChat Official Accounts* (Zoumacaijing, 2022). According to Xia's research (2017), for some We-media content creators who enjoy a large number of followers, their revenue from advertising has even exceeded that of many traditional big media organisations.

The Role of We-media in Creating Job Opportunities

Another important reflection is that the expansion of We-media has significantly contributed to job creation. According to statistics, the number of We-media practitioners increased from 1.46 million in 2014 to 2.4 million by 2016, reaching 3.3 million in 2021 (Insight and Info, 2021). In 2021, the number of full-time We-media workers in China reached 3.7 million, while the number of part-time workers exceeded 6 million (Lan, 2023). This growth highlights the expanding workforce and the economic opportunities generated by the We-media industry and its capacity to absorb a growing number of workers, providing them with various roles related to We-media content creation, distribution, and management. Taking *Douyin* as an example, from August 2019 to August 2020, *Douyin* alone drove a total of 36.17 million jobs (Chang, 2020).

In 2021, a survey was conducted by the *Social Survey Centre of China Youth Daily* (Wenjuan.com) among 1,213 young people aged 18-35 on their interests in careers. It shows that 52.9% of the respondents showed high interest in running online stores, 49.2% in digital media operations, 43.0% in becoming We-media audio/video content creators, and 42.1% in We-media article creators (The Paper, 2021). Moreover, according to the "*China 3-Year College Graduates' Employment Annual Report*" released by MYCOS (2022), the proportion of Chinese college graduates working in We-media has increased in recent years. In 2021, 0.7% of undergraduates were employed in We-media relevant jobs, which means that 7 out of every 1,000 graduates were working in this field. This is a 2.5-fold increase compared to the figure in 2019 which was 0.2% (See the figure 4.3). The report also shows that editors and web designers are the two most popular job positions among these new digital media workers, each accounting for 17.9% of the total. Following these are digital content planning and operations (15.4%), digital advertising planners (10.3%), film and animation producers (7.7%), and advertising copywriters (7.7%). The report also

shows that the starting salary for undergraduates working in digital media careers has been continuously rising, from 4,763 CNY in 2017 to 5,737 CNY in 2021. There is a variation in starting salaries across different industries for media-related jobs (Liu, 2022).

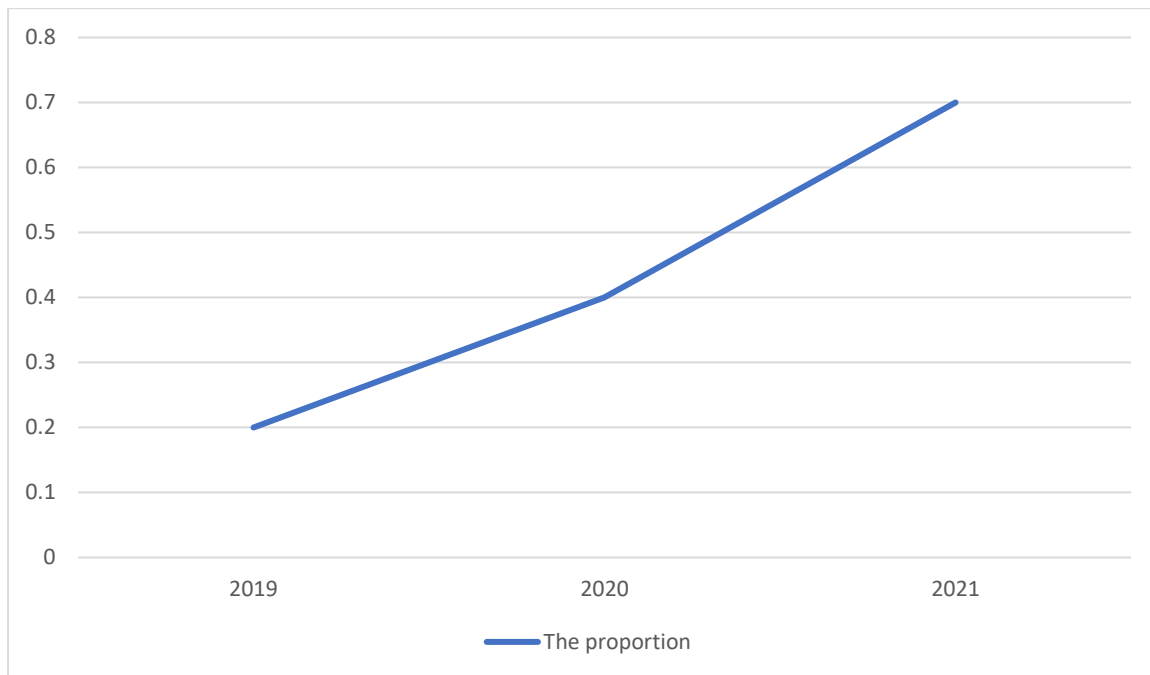


Figure 4.3: The proportion of We-media practitioners among undergraduate university graduates from 2019 to 2021. Resource from MyCOS

This growth in job opportunities is critical for the digital economy, as it stimulates ancillary industries such as digital marketing, e-commerce, and technology development. These statistics also indicate a trend towards increasing formalisation and professionalisation within the We-media sector, contributing to both economic growth and job creation in China.

4.3.2 Ideological Contributions

Alongside contributing to the economy, We-media has also played a crucial role in disseminating state-approved narratives, which is equally important for the state legitimacy from the perspective of Xi's governance. By aligning with the concept of cyber sovereignty, We-media ensures that its content in many ways supports state interests, reinforcing government propaganda and promoting social stability. This includes for example, fostering public engagement and promoting nationalism.

Campaigns on platforms like WeChat and *Douyin* have successfully garnered public support for state initiatives and national pride, highlighting the role of We-media in enhancing state legitimacy. For example, the anti-corruption campaign is a key tool for consolidating political power and enhancing the legitimacy of the CCP. Social media platforms like *Douyin* play a critical role in this strategy (Fu, 2015). To effectively achieve this goal, during specific periods of the campaign, online restrictions are temporarily relaxed, allowing for a more open flow of information. This tactic helps to amplify government messages and showcase high-profile anti-corruption cases, thus generating public support and portraying the government as committed to rooting out corruption at all levels. However, once the campaign's immediate objectives are achieved, restrictions are typically reimposed to maintain control over the narrative and suppress any dissenting voices (IFJ, 2015).

To illustrate how We-media has functioned under the state strategy through economic and ideological dimensions, the following part introduces the case of *Douyin*. By examining *Douyin*, we can see how We-media platforms have become integral tools for the CCP, balancing economic growth with strategic narrative control to enhance state legitimacy and maintain political stability.

4.3.3 A Case Study: *Douyin*, A Leading We-media Platform for Short-form Video Content

Douyin is one of the most prominent We-media platforms in China, focusing on short-form video content. Launched in September 2016 by *ByteDance*, *Douyin* quickly rose to prominence, becoming a leading short-video platform in the late 2010s with millions of active users (Chen & Zeng, 2020; Kaye et al., 2021; Lu & Lu, 2019). Its success is not only a testament to the platform's innovative approach to content creation and user engagement but also to its strategic alignment with the Chinese government's economic and ideological objectives. By the first quarter of 2018, it had become the most downloaded non-game app on the iOS App Store (Nelson, 2018), and by September 2020, it reported over 524 million monthly active users within the age bracket of 19-24 years (DaxueConsulting, 2021; (Lu & Lu, 2019; Qu, 2020)).

One of the main reasons for *Douyin* becoming popular among We-media content creators is its easy-to-use editing functions for creating UGC. It provides several cost-

effective tools and resources that make it easier for individuals to create, edit and monetise their content. It offers comprehensive in-app editing tools, allowing creators to produce professional-quality video without needing external software (Lu & Lu, 2019). These tools include, for example, filters and effects for enhancing video aesthetics, a music library for adding background music to videos, and transitions and cuts for easily trimming clips, adding transitions, and stitching together multiple clips. Additionally, pre-made video templates can be customised with creators' content. Most of these tools and resources are free or low-cost, enabling individuals to easily produce high-quality content without significant upfront investment or relevant professional knowledge (*Douyin*, 2023). Moreover, like WeChat, *Douyin* also provides built-in monetisation features, reducing the need for complex financial infrastructures (ibid.).

E-commerce Integration and Virtual Gifts

Douyin has significantly contributed to the Chinese digital economy through its integration of e-commerce features. The platform allows users to sell and purchase products directly from videos, transforming entertainment into a commercial experience. This integration has led to a boom in social commerce, where We-media creators can monetise their content by promoting and selling products. This includes a “merchandising on behalf” (*daihuo* 带货) facility, where We-media content creators can pin the products in their videos or live streams, allowing audiences to shop directly within the app (Yeung, 2019). (See as the *figure 4.4*). During major shopping festivals, *Douyin* hosts livestream events where *We-media* influencers and celebrities showcase products to their audiences, driving massive sales. For instance, during the 2020 Singles' Day shopping festival, *Douyin* reported a significant increase in sales through its platform, reflecting its impact on consumer behaviour and retail dynamics.



Figure 4.4: Douyin's integration with e-commerce platforms, allowing creators to sell products directly through the app

This model has effectively turned viewers into buyers and has been adopted by other international social media platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram, which have integrated similar features (Yeung, 2019). Another two popular We-media platforms, WeChat and Red Xiaohongshu (小红书), also have similar features, where users can buy products showcased in videos. This digital advertising ecosystem on these platforms is gradually developing into a mature e-commerce system. These platforms also excel in creating interactive and engaging content, such as live-streaming, polls, and interactive stories, which captivate users and encourage them to spend more time online. This high level of engagement translates into increased opportunities for advertising and sales, benefiting We-media content creators, the platforms and the broader economy (Su, 2019; Kaya, Chen & Zeng, 2020).

We-media creators can host live streams on these platforms to interact with their audience in real-time, enhancing the shopping experience and driving significant consumer spending. While watching live streams is free, viewers can send virtual gifts, which can be converted into real money (Scheibe et al., 2016). For example, in

Douyin's live stream rooms, 1 CNY (~\$0.16) equals to 10 *Douyin* coins. The cheapest gift is worth 0.1 CNY (~\$0.02) and the more expensive ones can exceed 3000 CNY (~\$466.05). More expensive gifts usually have fancier animations. We-media content providers can own 50% of a streamer's virtual gift income (Qiu, 2021). Under this model, both *Douyin* and We-media can gain huge profits from their users. More importantly, the economic boon has reflected that We-media is largely driven by the economic considerations. Given that gaining such profits can only be realised through abiding by state rules and control, the We-media in China is willing to stay in line with the state's rules, which will be explored further in the next chapter.

Douyin adopts algorithmic recommendations built by advanced technology to serve content, which would further shape content consumption and influence the broader dynamics of media control and diversity (Tufekci, 2015). This personalisation is designed to curate and recommend content based on user behaviours, preferences, and interaction history. However, it also creates "filter bubbles" or "echo chambers", where users are primarily exposed to content that aligns with their existing views and preferences, reducing content diversity (Pariser, 2011; Terren & Borge-Bravo, 2021). As a result, it has led to a trend of popular or trending topics being prioritised, often overshadowing niche or diverse content. This dynamic can reduce the overall variety of content accessible to a broader audience (Jones, 2023; Lee et al., 2022). Moreover, platforms tend to use these algorithms to maximise user engagement and time spent on the site, which directly correlates with advertising revenue (Artz, 2015). As a result, content that is more likely to retain user attention, often including sensational, entertaining, or emotionally charged content, is favoured by We-media content producers as well as platforms.

Promotion of State Narratives and Ideological Alignment

The Chinese government has recognised the power of these algorithms in shaping public opinion and leverages this technology for regulatory control. By influencing algorithmic parameters, the government has exerted a subtle yet powerful influence over the type of content that is widely disseminated, for example, content that portrays the government positively, emphasises social stability, or promotes national achievements. Figure 4.5 shows an example of the first video a new user

sees when they open *Douyin*, a video that promotes China's intangible cultural heritage.

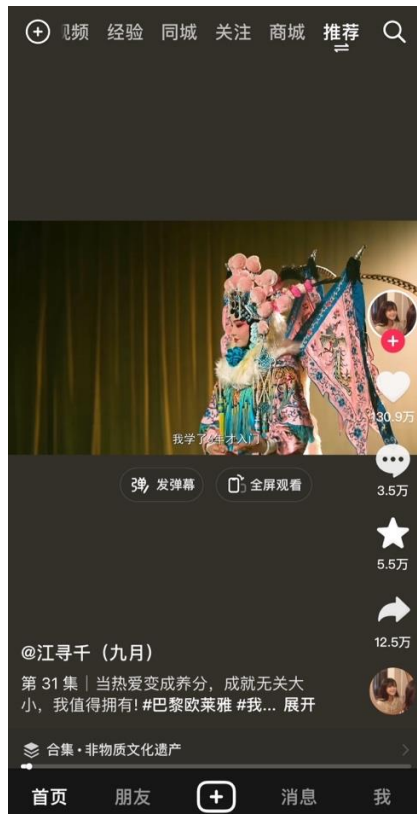


Figure4.5. A recommendation video on users' *Douyin* homepage

When looking at comparative studies on video-sharing platforms in the West, such as YouTube, Vine, and Snapchat, video-sharing and live streaming platforms in China distinguish themselves by using features unique to the Chinese political environment. For instance, Ding et al. (2011) found that most video creators on YouTube focus on everyday life experiences. Similarly, Yarosh et al. (2016) observed that youth authors on YouTube and Vine treat these platforms as stages for performance, storytelling, and expression of opinions and identities. In contrast, Chinese platforms like *Douyin* feature elements that align with political purposes, frequently featuring content that promotes patriotism, socialism, and the achievements of the CCP, thereby reinforcing state narratives (Chen et al., 2021; Fung & Hu, 2022).

For example, *Douyin* set up a trending feature entitled "positive energy" (Zheng Nengliang, 正能量) on its home interface (See as Figure 4.6) (Yang & Tang, 2018; Du,

2014). This section includes videos that promote the values of the CCP: national pride, and social harmony. The term “*Positive energy*” represents the ideologies, value systems, and ethos of the party state, serving as ideological buzzwords that symbolise Chinese patriotism (Yang & Tang, 2018; Du, 2014). The trending content in the “positive energy” section often promotes a specific type of propaganda, known as “playful patriotism”. This concept refers to “state-endorsed, but not necessarily orchestrated, light-hearted or amusing media content that promotes an established State ideology” (Chen et al., 2020, p. 15). *Douyin* leverages its platform features and audience engagement to amplify this playful patriotism, aligning public sentiment with CCP objectives.

As illustrated in Figure 4.6, *Douyin*’s home page features content that fosters national pride and supports government policies on the top of recommend list. This includes videos celebrating national achievements, like the top videos in the picture, titled “*Chinese students, overseas Chinese, and Chinese expatriates around the world hold the Five-Starred Red Flag and sing the national anthem*”, “*No matter where you are, please cheer for them! Hong Kong is China's Hong Kong, let's protect it together!*”, and “*the highlights of Xi Jinping’s 2024 European Tour*”. These videos celebrate national achievements and bolster a sense of collective identity and loyalty among the populace, aligning public sentiment with CCP objectives, such as Xi Jinping’s vision of the “China Dream”. *Douyin*, through its “positive energy” content and the promotion of playful patriotism, contributes significantly to this national narrative by fostering public support for state initiatives and enhancing the government’s legitimacy.

It is interesting to compare *Douyin* with TikTok, which shared the same parent company with *Douyin*, ByteDance. While it has a similar function to *Douyin*, there are no features analogous to the “positive energy” trending tab on TikTok. However, the current *Douyin* has updated its trending page, and made the trending topics more diverse, classifying the trending topic into five categories – Hot Search List, Recommendation List, Entertainment List, Society List, Challenge List. Although the previously “Positive Energy” was not explicitly labelled, it has now been categorised into these five trending lists in a more subtle way (see Figure 4.7).

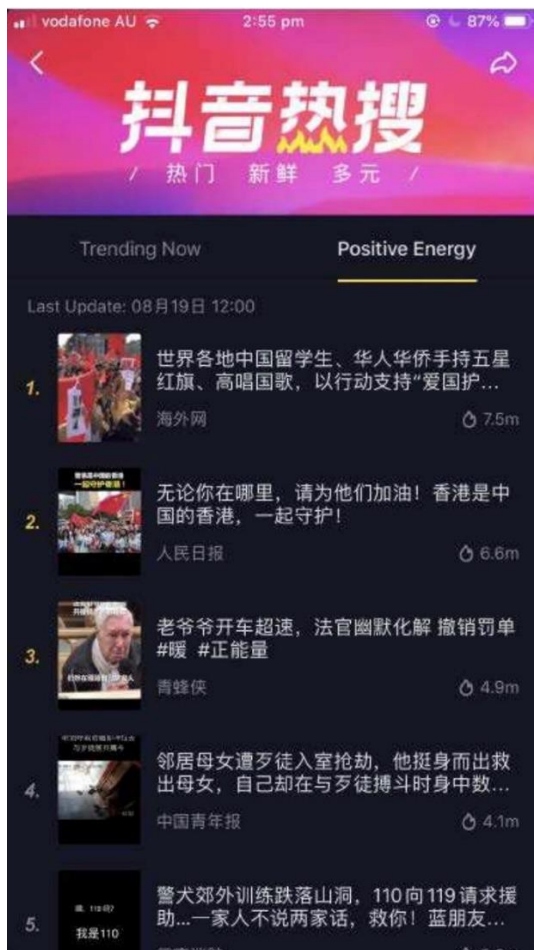


Figure 4.6: Old version of Douyin's trending page.
Resource from (Lu & Lu, 2019, p. 14)



Figure 4.7: Current version of Douyin

A similar situation arose on Sina Weibo. At a specific time, these We-media platforms would play the role of propaganda tool for the Party (See Figure 4.8). Weibo announced that adding the “New Era” (Xinshidai 新时代) channel into the hot trending category “aimed to better promote the spirit of the 19th National Congress, uphold socialist core values, and report on the social landscape of China's new era”. However, according to Yesky (2018), *The Beijing Cyberspace Administration* summoned Sina Weibo “for a talk” (被约谈) about a negative social incident, “Ziguangge Gutter Oil”, which trended on Weibo during the 19th National Congress. Subsequently, Sina Weibo issued an announcement stating that it accepted the criticism from the Cyberspace Administration and would temporarily take down and comprehensively rectify the “Hot Search List (resou 热搜)” and *Hot Topics List* (renmenhuati 热门话题). One week after Weibo had proactively taken down the “Hot Search List,” the platform introduced a

new "New Era" channel in the popular section of its homepage. This channel primarily features content published by central media outlets and government Weibo accounts.

From this point of view, domestic platforms like *Douyin* and *Sina Weibo* have to function under state strategies to achieve both economic and ideological objectives. In particular, during significant political events or anniversaries, they must feature content that highlights the government's achievements or historical narratives supportive of CCP perspectives, influencing public perception and reinforcing government messages. By driving economic growth while simultaneously disseminating state-approved narratives, We-media platforms must support the CCP's goals of maintaining social stability and reinforcing state legitimacy.



Figure 4.8: Sina Weibo Adds "New Era" Channel to Popular Section (Yesky, 2018).

Conclusion

This chapter concentrates on interpreting the rise of We-media under Xi Jinping's China despite the increasing political oversight within the context of the CCP's political legitimacy. In the long term, the CCP's state legitimacy has been primarily based on

the economic performance. The economic achievements from economic liberalising reforms generated abundant public support and recognition for the state. However, since Xi came to power, he has encountered legitimacy challenges due to the slowdown of economic growth. To surmount this challenge, Xi's strategy attempts to rehabilitate economic growth while tightening the ideological and social control at the same time. Hence, this strategy is also applied to his governance of Chinese We-media.

Specifically, Xi Jinping's government has adopted a combined "growth and control" strategy for We-media governance. The state issued multiple stimulation policies to incentivise the market development of We-media. Meanwhile, it has also evolved its controlling means to prevent unfettered expansion. The innovative approach, "cooperate with platforms", has shown how the rationale behind the state's governance of We-media is to navigate between growth and control, which can be opportunely revealed by the case of *Douyin*. This case demonstrates how Xi's governance of We-media platforms supports the Party's needs both economically and ideologically.

Overall, this chapter, from a macro-level, unravels the nuanced dynamics defining the relationship between state power and digital media in contemporary China. This relationship has largely impacted on but also reflected the state's governance of the We-media, as discussed. However, one should highlight that We-media and their practitioners are not completely passive or recipient in this process, even though the power relationship leans much more in favour of the state authority. In reality, the function of We-media and practices of these practitioners have shown that they retain certain autonomies in this process. The next chapter will elaborate on the changes and development of We-media, from a micro-level, showing how these We-media practitioners respond to state governance, their changing perceptions, and how these changes reshape the We-media landscape in China. Together, these two chapters will provide the reader with a comprehensive picture not only about We-media per se, but also the complex and intertwining relationship between the State and media in China.

Chapter 5. Interpretation of We-media and Practitioners in China

The rise of We-media in China, as explored in earlier chapters, can be attributed to an interplay between market forces and state interventions. The Chinese government has actively fostered the growth of the We-media industry to promote its political and economic agenda through the “growth and control” strategy in collaboration with digital platform companies, as discussed in Chapter 3. This strategy has created a unique environment where We-media practitioners are incentivised to produce content that boosts economic profits while avoiding topics that may irk authorities.

Throughout its development, We-media in China has undergone several significant transitions: from the early phase of personal blogs focused on individual expression to the rise of *Microblog* fostering a sense of community and citizen journalism, then to the launch of *WeChat* and the subsequent streaming and short video boom of such as *Douyin*, which brought more sophisticated and monetisable content, influenced by both technological advancements and political changes. However, it is also notable that, since the 2010s, the development of We-media in China has increasingly shifted from its roots in citizen journalism and grassroots democracy (Yu, 2017). Rather, it has transformed towards a predominantly profit-seeking commercial media (Fang, 2022).

In response to this context, this chapter concentrates on revealing in detail how We-media practitioners themselves, from a micro perspective, conduct their business as an effective response to the CCP’s governance of We-media. By doing so, this chapter provides a nuanced understanding of the operational dynamics within the We-media landscape in China.

This chapter contains three main sections. The first section the key findings of the fieldwork. It includes exploring the operational framework of We-media by examining the three main types of We-media in China: individual We-media (geren zimeiti 个人自媒体), group We-media (tuanti zimeiti 团体自媒体), and platforms’ sign-up We-media (pingtai qianyue zimeiti 平台签约自媒体). This section delves into how each type conducts its business, their main funding resources and three main factors shaping their content creation, namely, economic-profit motivation, journalistic professionalism,

and government policy, highlighting the implications for their activities and financial strategies. The final section addresses the tension between independence and stability in We-media, examining how practitioners navigate the trade-offs between creative freedom and financial security.

5.1 Fieldwork insights: We-media practices and practitioners

In recent years, the concept of the business model has become globally significant, being linked to achieving a competitive advantage in the market (Magretta, 2002; Wirtz et al., 2016), and long-term profitability and sustainability (Stewart & Zhao, 2000). Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010) describe it as a model that strategically depicts how a company or individual business creates, delivers, and captures value, illustrating the way they structure themselves in order to take advantage of business opportunities (Amit & Zott, 2001). However, Teece (2010) characterises a business model as a conceptual framework, emphasising that it is not just a financial construct, but rather the “design or architecture of the value creation, delivery, and capture mechanisms” of a firm (p.172).

In media studies, where news and information providers have specific production and distribution processes, Fetscherin and Knolmayer (2004) introduced the content delivery model, which consists of five components: the product, the consumer, the revenue, the price, and the delivery. In brief, the product refers to various forms of media content such as text, videos, and podcasts. The consumer is central to this model, targeting the audience who consume the content. The consumer also plays a fundamental role in linking the revenue and the pricing aspects of this model (Chyi & Tenenboim, 2017). Essentially, how much money the media makes and how they price their content are both influenced by the consumer. The revenue involves the monetisation strategy for the content, such as through advertisements or subscriptions. The pricing strategies, in this model, balance free and premium content. For example, offering free content helps attract a broader audience, while premium content targets dedicated followers willing to pay for more exclusive content, ensuring a sustainable revenue model. The last delivery component encompasses the methods and

distribution channels used to deliver the content to the consumer. It can involve various distribution platforms and technologies to ensure the content reaches the intended audience efficiently.

However, this model also has limitations as the research was primarily developed based on the newspaper and magazine industry, which provides both physical and digital products. It therefore faces challenges when applied to digital journalism (Zhang, 2019). For example, in digital journalism, the traditional concepts of price and consumer payment are less significant, as many digital platforms offer content for free, a phenomenon known as the “penny gap” (Anderson, 2009, p. 59; Chyi, 2012, p. 242). Meanwhile, digital media like We-media have some different ways through which revenue can be generated, such as subscriptions income and advertising revenue (Xia, 2017). To fill the gap, Zhang (2019) expands the business model into six components, namely, the consumer, the niche, the delivery, the revenue, the funding model and the profit-sharing mode. Zhang’s model places a particular emphasis on niche markets, specialisation, and differentiation, and maintaining the sustainability in digital content (Cook & Sirkkunen, 2013), which are not explicitly addressed in Fetscherin and Knolmayer’s framework. In the component of delivery, Zhang also points out the necessity to distribute and disseminate news and information through multi-platforms, in order to sustain and reach the widest audiences. Additionally, Zhang incorporates funding mechanisms and profit-sharing, highlighting financial support and incentives of the digital media platforms for content creators, such as copyright fees and subsidy (Xia, 2017), which are absent in the earlier model. These distinctions make Zhang’s model more tailored to the We-media landscape. It helps understand how We-media can operate and sustain their business, including aspects of consumer engagement, niche markets, multi-platform delivery, revenue models, and funding mechanisms. However, Zhang’s model does not account for the regulatory environment in China.

This chapter applies Zhang’s model to examine how We-media in China operate and maintain their business in the digital landscape of China, while also considering the regulatory constraints unique to the Chinese context. This section begins by categorising the different types of We-media in China, which is significant for understanding the diverse ways these media entities operate and generate revenue, particularly in an environment heavily influenced by government regulations. It also

identifies these categories within my fieldwork and explores the factors impacting We-media content creation, dissemination, and monetisation.

5.1.1 The Classification of We-media in China: Individual, Group, and Platform-signed We-media

We-media in China can be categorised in several ways based on various criteria (Chinabgao, 2024; Wang, 2018; Zhang, 2022). For example, Wang (2020) categorises We-media based on their media content into two main types: general lifestyle We-media (dazhong shenghuo zimeiti 大众生活自媒体) and professional We-media (zhuanye zimeiti 专业自媒体). Specifically, general lifestyle We-media refers to those We-media accounts focusing on broad lifestyle topics relevant to a wide audience, including areas such as health, fashion, food, travel. In contrast, professional We-media specialises in specific fields like finance, education, technology, etc., providing expert insights, in-depth analysis, and professional knowledge to their audience (Wang, 2020, pp.45). We-media can also be categorised based on diverse content formats, such as text-based, image-based, video/audio-based, and comprehensive combinations (Chinabgao, 2024; Zhang, 2022).

Additionally, We-media can be classified by the operating model, which emphasises ownership, main income sources, and operational strategies. For example, Zhang (2022) and Sun (2022) both divide We-media into individual We-media (geren zimeiti 个人自媒体) and group We-media (tuanti zimeiti 团体自媒体). Individual We-media refers to independent content creators who operate as sole proprietors, managing their business activities without formal incorporation. Their income is often unstable and some of them treat We-media as a part-time job. Group We-media, on the other hand, refers to formally registered businesses involving small teams and operating within structured business models (BizNext, 2017). Compared to individual We-media, group We-media demonstrate higher scalability potential and the ability to attract larger sponsorships and offer additional services. For example, by building Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) that add multiple We-media content creators as their partners, they manage multiple creators to maximise revenue and audience reach (Yang, 2018, pp. 17-19). One typical example is *Papitube*, mentioned in Chapter 3, which was founded

by the famous Chinese We-media content creator Papa Jiang. As a group We-media, *Papitube* manages a network of influencers and provides them with resources to create high-quality content. It leverages Papi Jiang's brand to attract more creators and negotiate better deals (Jiayu, 2017).

However, a special type of We-media that has been overlooked by these studies is platform-signed We-media (pingtai qianyue zimeiti 平台签约自媒体). This type of We-media refers to those that sign contracts with major digital platforms, regularly providing them with high quality content. In exchange for good quality content creation, the platforms provide some services, such as technical support, promotional tools, and sometimes financial support for these signed We-media accounts, as introduced in Chapter 4. It is necessary to emphasise that both individual We-media and group We-media can become platform-signed We-media by signing contracts with the digital platforms. For example, this model can include an individual We-media content provider who primarily works independently or a We-media company that also produces exclusive content for these signed contract platforms, through opening multiple We-media accounts on the platform, receiving direct payments and bonuses from the platform (Dong, 2017, p. 85; Zhang & Li, 2015, p. 44). However, to participate in this type of We-media, since they operate under contracts with major platforms, compared to purely independent We-media, they must follow the platforms' guidelines and requirements.

Despite these constraints, they also get more opportunities to monetise their content. For example, they benefit from access to larger audiences through platform algorithms and marketing, as well as facilitated advertisement and sponsorship deals. Some platforms may pay creators to produce exclusive content available only on their platforms. This not only provides income but also boosts user engagement on the platform. Moreover, many platforms offer performance-based incentives, where content creators receive bonuses based on metrics like views, engagement, and audience growth. This can include direct payments, grants, or revenue-sharing agreements based on content performance.

During my fieldwork, I interviewed a total of 13 We-media practitioners. These practitioners included four individual We-media operators, with two having previously operated as individual We-media but subsequently exited the We-media industry. Additionally, there were nine group We-media practitioners. Notably, among these 13 practitioners, 10 were platform-signed We-media, indicating a significant prevalence of formal agreements with major digital platforms among both individual and group We-media entities, highlighting the critical role platforms play in the operational strategies and sustainability of We-media practitioners (See the list of interviews).

5.2 Factors Impacting We-media Content Creation, Dissemination, and Monetisation

The We-media industry in China functions within a complex environment influenced by various factors that shape how content is created, disseminated, and monetised. Understanding these factors is crucial for comprehending the operational dynamics of We-media practitioners. This study examines three main factors that significantly impact We-media practices: economic-profit motivation, journalistic professionalism, and government policies. By examining these elements, along with fieldwork findings, this section illustrates how these forces impact the strategies and operations of We-media practitioners.

5.2.1 Economic-Profit Motivation as One of the Main Driving Forces

Economic incentives are a major driving force behind We-media content creation. In recent years, the pursuit of profit has become normalised within the We-media industry in China. Analysing 19 annual reports from 2015 to 2020 from seven main organisations, such as Newrank, Topklout, Penguin Intelligence and Tencent Research Institute, Fang (2022) found a consistent theme: nearly all these reports define We-media as having “commercialisation as their goal”. The focus is predominantly on “monetisation” and “traffic bonus”, emphasising the sale of audience attention to advertisers (pp. 83-4). For instance, Newrank’s Report (2016) on the Development of We-media states that “Renminbi is the major motivating factor for the Zimeiti community” (Zimeiti is the Chinese term for We-media). This statement was based on a survey among We-media practitioners, revealing that 51% of the

respondents are motivated by financial gain, compared to 28.5% driven by personal interest and 18% seeking fame.

Economic profit is the primary motivation for the creation of content. This sentiment was also expressed by the respondents in my interviews (IE-1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11 12 14, 15, 17, 2022). More than half of my interviewees, whether individual We-media operators or group entities, prioritised economic profit as a core objective. For example, one interviewee, a former journalist who had worked on a commercial newspaper for 14 years, stated:

“I started my own We-media career in 2017, focusing on posting stories about local property market and government housing policy. The main reason I left my previous job was the low income. I was a professional journalist covering political policy and law, reporting in a local commercial press for more than ten years, but my salaries were only around 5,000 CNY per month. Since I began to work for We-media, my income has increased at least tenfold” (IE-1, 2022).

He further explained that, like his previous job on a provincial capital city paper, journalists’ monthly salaries are composed of a basic wage, writing income and an annual bonus:

“In my previous job, the basic wage of each journalist was around 2,000 CNY per month, and the writing income was based on the number of articles and words published in the newspaper. For a 1000 words news article on the front page, I got around 200 CNY. However, the front-page slots were limited, and only a few journalists got their work published there. Others earned small amounts for articles in less prominent sections, often less than 100 CNY per day. The annual bonus for journalists ranged from around 8,000 – 40,000 CNY, based on their performance” (IE-1, 2022).

Another interviewee shared a similar experience. He worked as a professional journalist covering financial reporting on a party paper for over ten years before starting his own We-media account in 2015. He stated:

“I love writing stories, but my previous job in an official party paper restricted certain topics that might be considered too sensitive or unsuitable for a party paper. Each report had to follow the paper system’s requirements, and the paper took most of the credit. At that time, I opened my own WeChat public account just to post and write about things I enjoyed. One article I posted went viral with over 100,000 clicks. This article brought my first advertisement worth 70,000 CNY, almost ten times my monthly income. So, I decided to leave the paper and focus on my We-media career as a full-time job” (IE-2, 2022).

Similar statements were found among over half of my interviewees, who reported significant income increases since joining We-media. This shift aligns with the changing media environment, marked by the decline of traditional media and the rise of the digital media, as discussed in Chapter 3. As a matter of fact, the superior income was particularly appealing to the former traditional media practitioners that I interviewed here. These individuals have experienced the decline of the traditional media industry, making them more sensitive to the substantial income potential in the We-media industry. One interviewee, a former paper editor for eleven years and managing director of a local radio and TV station for nine years, stated:

“As a high-level manager in traditional media for twenty years, I witnessed the decline of traditional media with falling audiences, circulation and advertising revenues. Especially the loss of advertising investments significantly impacted this decline, leading to economic crises, wage cuts, and reduced staff. In my previous job, as I know, almost half of my former colleagues resigned, and many of them joined We-media. I was one of them”

(IE-8, 2022).

The contraction of legacy media, as described by this interviewee, has been prevalent in the Chinese media landscape since the 2010s (Sparks et al. 2016). This trend was similar to the situation in the West in the 2000s (See for example, Franklin, 2014; Hovden, 2016; Višňovský & Radošinská, 2017). For example, in the United States, the number of full-time journalists in legacy media declined from 122,000 in 1992 to around 116,000 in 2002, with an even sharper decline in the next decade, driven by layoffs and decreased job satisfaction due to reduced professional autonomy and pay cuts (Weaver, 2015). Similarly, in the UK, from January 2008 to September 2009, 106 local newspapers closed, leading to job cuts and a shift of journalists to online media (Curran, 2010).

In the meantime, the pursuit of economic profit not only motivates practitioners to join We-media, but also significantly shapes their daily practices, including content creation and dissemination (Wang, 2019, p. 99). For many We-media practitioners, competing for attention, increasing net traffic and attracting investments have become their primary aims. This focus on commercialisation often leads them to prioritise topics likely to “achieve a higher valuation”, “monetise attention” and identify “the big business opportunity” (Gao & Krogstie, 2015; Fang, 2022). As a result, the real voices from grassroots groups remain under-represented. This issue will be further explored in Chapter 6.

5.2.2 Journalistic Professionalism: We-media Identity and Autonomy

Journalistic professionalism is the second force that impacts We-media practitioners' motivation and practice. This professionalism is mainly externalised in two facets: professional journalist identity and professional journalist autonomy. The concept of journalistic professionalism is considered as an important perspective to understand the behaviours and decisions of media practitioners when they conduct media reporting. Although many studies argue that a universal journalistic culture and values have not yet emerged (Weaver et al, 2012), there are some shared ideas within the debate.

For example, Hanitzsch (2007) defined journalistic professionalism as “a particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful” (p.369). Deuze (2005) states that journalistic professionalism refers to “an ideology, or common set of ideals and values” that journalists embrace, and this ideology builds upon five basic principles: autonomy, immediacy, ethics, objectivity, and public service. Similarly, Huang (2005) states that journalists are considered professionals because they hold consensus on three values: objectivity, detachment, and independence.

Although the arguments are various, discussions around journalistic professionalism typically address two main questions: what is journalistic professionalism and how is journalistic professionalism used in practice? For the first question, some scholars argue that the journalistic professionalism only applies to professional journalists working in the traditional media organisations that have a code of ethics, trained communication skills, and strict editorial guidelines (for example, Hamada, 2018; Deuze & Witschge, 2018). For instance, Deuze and Witschke (2018) state that legacy media is “the supposed core of journalism”. In their logic, legacy media’s function is to provide professional and truthful news reporting (Hanitzsch, 2017; Zhao, 1998).

However, the rise of We-media has challenged traditional notions of professional journalism. The growth of social media and digital platforms has enabled many individuals to create informative and high-quality content independently. In particular, as discussed previously, many former professional journalists have left traditional media and transferred to conduct media activities independently on the internet. The development of digital media and social media platforms has blurred the boundaries between professional journalists and digital journalistic actors (Deuze & Witschge, 2018; Esser & Neuberger, 2019). In many cases, We-media practitioners are able to provide unique perspectives on news and events that may not be covered by legal media. As Gant (2007) explicitly points out, “the mainstream media neglect much of what is worth knowing and worth thinking about. Now, with the rise of social media platforms, many more people are passing on their observations and ideas, playing a role previously occupied only by members of the institutional journalism” (p.45). Thus, we cannot overlook the journalistic practices of these digital actors on network media. Instead, these new digital actors have revitalised journalistic practices, making

journalism more horizontal, participative, and interactive (Bruns & Nuernbergk 2019; Engelke, 2019).

Taking this project as an example, among the eight interviewees, a journalistic background was prevalent, with around 70% either having received journalistic education and training or having worked as professional journalists in a traditional media system. Their practice and choices in working for We-media have been affected inevitably by the ideology of journalistic professionalism. Many interviewees indicated that having a journalistic background is a significant requirement for hiring employee in We-media (IE-3, IE-6, 2022). The remaining 30%, who did not have a journalistic background, also follow similar principles of journalistic professionalism. This adherence to journalistic principles is reflected in two aspects: journalistic identity and journalistic autonomy.

We-media identity

Research on the journalistic identities of digital actors on internet media indicates that these individuals often preserve established journalistic identities rather than disrupting the field (Schapals, Maares & Hanusch, 2019). Accordingly, most of them perceive themselves as journalists and claim to follow journalistic norms and ideals (Lichtenstein et al, 2021; Eldridge 2014; Mortensen, Keshelashvili, and Weir, 2016; Tandoc and Foo, 2018; Wagemans, Witschge, and Deuze, 2016; Wegener, 2019). For example, in an interview study focusing on journalistic YouTubers in Germany, Lichtenstein et al (2021) found that most of their interviewees perceive themselves as journalistic actors. They believe their YouTube experiences are related to a media logic belonging to journalism's professionalism, based on producing media content with professional editorial structures, disseminating media information to the public and interacting with audiences.

This journalistic identity is also evident among China's We-media practitioners. During the fieldwork, many We-media practitioners identified themselves as "workers for media (媒体工作者)" and claimed to follow journalistic norms and ideals in their daily work process, even without formal professional training or institutional background. One interviewee stated, "Although my major in college was not journalism and I never

worked for any traditional media organisations, being a We-media practitioner, I produce my original stories, edit videos, and disseminate the media content to the public all by myself, which makes me consider myself a professional media worker” (IE-5, 2022). Similar statements can be discovered explicitly or implicitly among the interviews, which also conform to the view of Schudson (2011) that “journalistic professionalism is applicable to online media actors whose job is to produce and disseminate news information and views about contemporary affairs of general public interest and importance” (p.3).

The commitment to public service is another important aspect of journalistic identity, particularly in the Chinese context. The aim and emphasis of “producing and disseminating information for public service” are particularly obvious among the Chinese media workers, as the concept of journalistic professionalism in China is a mixture of Chinese traditional culture and journalistic skills (Lin, 2010b; Rui, 2010; Xu, 2013). Chinese journalists generally regard themselves as traditional intellectuals, or the literati who prioritise the nation’s interests over individual rights (De Burgh, 2003; Lee, in de Burgh ed., 2005). According to Hassid (2011), there are four types of journalistic professionalism in China, with a small number emulating the American-style objectivity and political neutrality in reporting, others embracing an advocacy and willingness to “stand up for causes they believe in”, even though they might be politically sensitive (p.20). The majority of Chinese journalists are either communist professionals who believe in the supremacy of the CCP and play the propaganda role for the party, or are workday journalists who see their jobs “as not a calling but merely a source of income”. Although these four groups of Chinese journalistic professionals have different views of the nature of their professional duties, they all share “a commitment to public service” and aim at “solving specific social or political problems” (p.9, p.817).

Following Hassid’s idea of using journalistic professionalism to explore We-media practitioners, this project found that their ideas and beliefs regarding professionalism in public service also influence their views and practices in their We-media work. One interviewee stated that although the We-media he works for focuses on introducing automobiles and vehicles sales, his team regularly plans “meaningful” and “positive”

projects to “inspire the public”. The aim of these projects is to “intertwine the amusing with the educational” (Yujiao yule寓教于乐). He gave the following example:

“In 2018, we started to do a series on the evolution of agriculture vehicles in China. We hired a professional photographic team and visited more than twenty different rural areas across China. Economic profits were not the main goal. More importantly, we wanted to show the public, especially the younger Chinese generations, how farmers in rural China work and how their agricultural tools have evolved, which we thought were meaningful” (IE-3, 2022).

Studies in Western societies have found that many new digital actors tend to adopt monitorial roles as commentators or analysts of events (Ekdale et al, 2010), complementing newsroom journalism by covering topics or opinions that they perceive as underrepresented in the legacy media agenda (Steindl, Lauerer, and Hanitzsch 2017; Eldridge, 2014). We-media practitioners in China also play similar roles. For example, one interviewee pointed out that the main themes of the We-media she works for focus on issues that affect people’s lives:

“The content we post on our We-media accounts is all-encompassing. But the main aim is to provide inspiration for lifestyles, such as education advice, health care, book reviews and travel guides. During the pandemic period, we cooperated with another We-media owner on medical care video to introduce some international Covid-19 vaccines and add information that was underrepresented in official news reports. The video was initially successfully uploaded but only survived for one day before being deleted by the platform” (IE-7, 2022).

She further added, “we knew talking about Covid-19 vaccines at that time was sensitive, but sometimes we like to take the risk to do something we think is important to the public” (IE-7, 2022). This is a quintessential example of how media content is driven and shaped by the media workers’ journalistic identity, which is epitomised by their public service mentality. This We-media content creator might have been aware

that their post about Covid-19 related topics could incur a ban from the authority, yet they persisted in posting this content because they believed it could contribute to public health and help people unfamiliar with vaccine knowledge. Essentially, they believe media workers have “obligations” (IE-7, 2022) to disseminate this knowledge and information during such a harsh period.

We-media autonomy

Journalistic professionalism also involves the pursuit of autonomy. Autonomy is considered a “core ideal of the standard model of professional journalism” (Waisbord, 2013, p.43). However, in practice, professional journalism can never be autonomous and journalists always “feel the gaps between the ideal of autonomy and the actual freedoms they practice” (Willnat, Weaver & Choi, 2013, pp.163-183). In this regard, Reich and Hanitzsch (2013) distinguish between external and internal autonomy. External autonomy refers to “all forces restricting the political autonomy of news organisations, including state censorship and ideology, economy, legislation, and regulation”, while internal autonomy concerns “force and pressure rooted inside the news media organisations” (pp133-156).

In China, the issue of journalistic autonomy is exacerbated by government control over media institutions (Saether, 2008). This idea of journalistic professionalism, which emphasises objective and detached reporting, conflicts with the CCP’s party propaganda, which views the media as the party’s mouthpiece (Pan & Chan, 2003; Wu, 2009a; Lu, 2003; Lu & Pan, 2002). However, in many cases in China, “the professional logic is not strong enough to oppose the political logic” (Lin, 2010a: 421; Xu, 2013). It is also one of the reasons why We-media in China are considerably attracted to these former journalists and their influence on the profession of journalism (Yang, 2014). The rise of We media offers an alternative to the perceived weaknesses of mainstream journalistic professional autonomy, providing more space to conduct independent media reporting.

We-media are very different from traditional media groups. Compared to the traditional media such as television, prints and broadcasting, which normally have a restricted and hierarchical system with a minority group at the top, such as editors, producers, and reporters, who are known in media theory as “gatekeepers”, making

all the decisions about how to report news and what kind of information topics can appear on their media (Levinson, 2013), We-media allows individuals to easily produce and disseminate their information products independently. In addition, people working for We-media can easily play the roles of editor, producer, and reporter alone, simultaneously (Zhang, 2017). This flexibility enables We-media to operate in small teams or even individually, fostering greater autonomy in content creation. One interviewee working in a group We-media stated,

“Our We-media team currently has three staff only. All of us used to work in traditional media. I am in charge of content creating and editing sometimes, while another two handle editing content and advertising. Since we are a small team, we operate very flexibly without strict hierarchical roles. We have an equal partnership in our team, which is what I enjoy most about We-media. We can work from home or in a café shop” (IE-14, 2022).

He also admitted that during the process of writing stories for their We-media, either creating original media content or writing for advertisers, his team still uses professional editorial structures that require newsroom journalism’s professional norms and routines. For example, the content on their We-media still follows the so-called “inverted pyramid writing style” which most Chinese professional journalists would like to use (Xu, 2013, p.31).

Another group We-media owner explained that, similar to traditional media’s procedure for news producing, his team holds weekly meetings to discuss trending topics and decide on stories for the upcoming week.

“Since now we are responsible for the whole We-media production process and management, we ensure we post 1-2 original content weekly. We do not need to present the latest news daily like legal media organisations. Instead, we spend time on more than selecting information and focus on producing high-quality content with objective and accurate analysis to attract and maintain our audience” (IE-15, 2022).

In this regard, We-media are largely self-responsible but still adhere to professional editorial structures and norms. The lack of hierarchical editing and censoring mechanisms inside We-media allows these We-media practitioners more flexibility to decide what and how they are going to create and post. However, it does not mean that We-media's content can be shown in public in the way they like, due to the We-media platforms' regulation and management, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

In summary, journalistic professionalism significantly influences We-media practitioners' motivations and practices. The professional identities and autonomy of these practitioners shape their content creation, dissemination, and monetisation strategies, highlighting the evolving nature of journalism in the digital age.

5.2.3 Government policy and We-media

Government policy is the third critical force shaping the pathway of We-media development in China. As discussed in previous chapters, over the past two decades, the Chinese government has implemented numerous laws, regulations and policies on internet governance. These policies aim to maintain stability and control the flow of information within the state (for example, Jiang & Okamoto, 2014; Yang & Mueller, 2014), while also promoting economic development and internet technology innovation for the domestic market for internet business and services (Herold & Seta, 2015; Hong, 2017; Shen, 2016). Miao et al (2020) highlight that "Chinese internet policies have focused on a combination of issues including security, content regulation and digital economy" (p.17).

Among the studies on Chinese internet governance, some focus on specific policies such as China's real name registration policies (Jiang, 2015), provisions of China's online publishing service (Huang, 2022), and more recently China's new cybersecurity laws and data policies (e.g., Triolo, Sacks, Webster, & Creemers, 2017). Despite most regulations and policies targeting internet management, very few have specifically addressed We-media until the past decade. Nonetheless, since We-media is facilitated by the growth of the internet and social media, these regulations and policies have played a critical role in shaping the development of We-media, particularly, by

constraining and influencing We-media practitioners' behaviours in practising journalism and how they conduct their business activities.

Based on the fieldwork findings, several key laws and regulations frequently mentioned by interviewees significantly affect We-media in China. The most commonly cited restriction is the prohibition of privately owned internet websites, including digital news platforms and social media sites where We-media practitioners typically post, from initiating news reporting as traditional journalists do. In other words, these online private digital websites, such *Sina* and *Tencent*, are not allowed to employ their own journalists, and We-media practitioners are restricted from acting as professional journalists in conducting interviews and news reporting. During the interviewing, 16 interviewees stated that this is the core rule that affected their ways of producing media content.

It is also notable that this restriction has been mentioned and emphasised many times in various government policies. For instance, it was first mentioned in *Interim Provisions for Online News Publication*, issued in 2000, and further was emphasised in *Internet News Information Services Regulations* in 2005. Then it was referred to again in the rules for *the Licensed Management of Internet News Information Services* published in June 2017 (CAC, 2017). The party-state refined the restriction again in 2021.

Meanwhile, We-media content creators have adopted various tactics to circumvent these barriers. One common method is collaborating with professional journalists from authorised news institutions to conduct interviews and report news. One interviewee explained, "Based on our networks, we collaborate with journalists in legal media, sharing the news information and sources with them. Then we cite their work and develop our content on their news articles" (IE-1, 2022). Another interviewee mentioned that in some cases, they simply gather information from publicly available sources such as government reports, official news, online posts and comments by citizen journalists. They then build and reinforce their arguments using this kind of public information (IE-2, 2022).

Despite these tactics, more than half of the interviewees admitted that they still conduct interviews and create news stories “like the journalists do” (IE-07, 2022), but must keep their toes away from the “sensitive topics” and not challenge the party line (IE-10, 2022). One interviewee emphasised that developing a high-quality We-media account with a good reputation and loyal audiences requires keeping up with current affairs and trending topics, checking the latest news information as professional journalists do (IE-12, 2022).

“As I know, all the We-media are more or less doing news reporting. We follow the same procedures as traditional journalists for news reporting, but we don’t call it ‘interviewing’; we refer to it as ‘recording’ or ‘counselling’ to avoid breaking the rule” (IE-12, 2022).

Other interviewees noted that many We-media practitioners operate in a “grey area”. One stated, “the government knows We-media are doing interviews for news reporting”, but they turn a blind eye as long as we don’t touch anything inappropriate” (IE-11, 2022). However, “If we report some news or conduct interviews that are deemed sensitive or critical of the government, we will face censorship, punishment, and even imprisonment” (IE-17, 2022).

Besides these restrictions forbidding We-media from news reporting, a variety of laws and regulations, such as licensing requirements, real-name registration, platform censorship mechanisms, which as mentioned in previous chapters, explicitly delineate the boundaries of We-media content, therefore, have substantially shaped We-media practitioners’ behaviours in their topic choices and content production.

One interviewee from a We-media video group shared her experience. She was an investigative journalist in a commercial newspaper and won a journalist prize for her explanatory reporting. Facing increasing difficulty in conducting deep reporting at her previous job, she transitioned to We-media:

“I joined a We-media team expected to do independent investigative reporting. We aimed to produce videos offering independent sights on social issues, such as environment problems. However, we encountered troubles

due to a video on environmental pollution which was considered as a sensitive issue. Our team was warned and shut down by the platforms for a month. At that time, we lost most of our investors. To fix the financial problems, we had to make changes. Now we only do entertainment videos” (IE-11, 2022).

She further added that working on We-media is much harder and less secure than she anticipated. One of her friends had their We-media account shut down permanently because of some politically sensitive and controversial content. “Twenty years ago, in the paper, I could do some investigative reporting due to the support and protection from the paper agency. Now in We-media, I feel insecure. Building a We-media team group is challenging, but it is too easy to destroy it in China. For example, the government can use licensing processes to suspend or cancel our We-media licences, or interview restrictions to sanction us. We cannot afford the risks” (IE-11, 2022).

In summary, government policies significantly shape the development of We-media in China, imposing restrictions that constrain journalistic activities and business operations. These key regulations include such as prohibition of privately owned platforms from initiating news reporting, compelling We-media practitioners to adopt workaround tactics and avoid sensitive topics to evade censorship and punitive measures. However, these constraints force practitioners to operate within a "grey area", facing challenges such as temporary shutdowns, investor loss, and the threat of censorship. Consequently, posting politically sensitive content poses risks not only from authorities but also to commercial interests, highlighting the complex interplay between regulation and media innovation in China's digital landscape.

5.3 Financial resources of We-media

Having explored the three main forces shaping We-media content creation, dissemination, and monetisation, it is clear that economic motivations, journalistic professionalism, and government policies collectively influence not only the operational practices of We-media practitioners but also their financial strategies. Understanding the main financial resources of We-media provides further insight into

how these entities sustain themselves in a complex and regulated digital landscape. This section examines the primary revenue streams that enable We-media to thrive despite the challenges posed by regulatory and market dynamics. In particular, there are five main financial resources of We-media, including advertising, paid content, VIP memberships, profit-sharing models, and e-commerce integration. Each of these serves as revenue streams at different levels.

As discussed, We-media in current China has emerged as a powerful force, both economically and politically, influencing the information creation and distribution in the cyber space. Central to the success of We-media's business is its ability to capture and retain user attention, a concept known as the attention economy (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Gambaro, 2013, pp.51). The attention economy is an economic concept wherein human attention is treated as a scarce commodity and is monetised by businesses and platforms. In this paradigm, consumer attention is seen as a valuable resource because it is limited and in high demand.

Yang (2013) states that the aim of this attention economy is similar for both traditional commercial media and digital media like We-media, that is, to attract audiences and sell their attention to advertising agencies. The difference is that for traditional media, audiences' attention is shown as, for example, newspaper sales or the ratings and views for television programmes; while in digital media like We-media, audiences' attention is shown mainly through the volume of Web traffic, clicks and forwards and the number of subscribers. The primary goal within the attention economy is to capture and retain this attention, which can then be converted into revenue through various means such as advertising, subscription services, and other monetisable engagements (Sheehan & Morrison, 2009; Doyle, 2013).

In the context of We-media, there are five primary ways to monetise attention, namely, advertising, paid content, VIP memberships, profit-sharing models, and e-commerce integration. Among them, advertising is the primary financial resource of We-media income.

Advertising

As the predominant revenue stream of all types of We-media – individual, group and platform-signed We-media - advertising includes banner ads, sponsored posts, or embedded ads within videos or articles (Pavlik, 2013; Levinson, 2012). Brands pay We-media practitioners to promote their products or services. These sponsorships can be negotiated on a case-by-case basis and often depend on the creator's reach and influence (Liu & Zhang, 2014). For example, for these We-media accounts using *WeChat Official Accounts Platform*, when their subscribers reach 500, they can choose to implant the inter link of the ads on their We-media posting page, and they get paid for the number of people who click on the ads (WeChat, 2022). For some advertisements which sell products, the We-media sometimes can get paid a percentage every time someone clicks on the ads and buys something from the advertisements (IE-5, 2022). Thus, to attract more clicks, the We-media normally choose to place ads that relate in some ways to the subjects of their posting topics. In many cases, they might embed the ads within more desirable content like trending topics which attract audiences' attention (Hayes et al., 2020). Having said that, this advertising monetisation is now extensively applied in We media.

One of my interviewees, who owns two We-media start-ups, with a total of over 9 million followers in mainland China, stated that, basically, the price of advertising depended mainly upon "how widespread the We-media is, how many subscribers the We-media enjoys and how many readers the advertiser can expect" (IE-6, 2022). Taking her We-media channels as an example, the broad range of advertising price is from 10,000 minimum to 100,000 CNY maximum. Her account usually receives four advertisements for a month, which generates around 40,000 to 400,000 CNY in income for this 15-people team per month. If I assume this income would be distributed evenly to each team member (which is certainly a parsimonious assumption, as in reality the owner of this We-media would take a major part of this revenue), then each member would receive around 6,500 to 26,000 CNY in economic profit. This figure has already surpassed the average income of traditional journalists in China, and this is only the revenues generated from the advertisements.

Another individual We-media interviewee stated that, considering she operates the We-media all by herself, she provides two customised services for advertising and

each of them has an accurate price tag. “The first one is that I get paid in advance by posting the ads’ content on given subjects from advertisers. The price range is from 800 to 2,000 CNY, based on the form of the ads, such as texts or videos. The second service is to create the ads’ content for the advertisers. I might embed the ads with some eye-catching stories or videos, in case this interests the audiences. The price of this service is about 4000 CNY” (IE-11, 2022). Besides, there are some other methods for We-media to get revenues from advertising approaches. For example, *Papi Jiang*, a popular Chinese blogger mentioned earlier, held an electronic auction for the first online ads on her We-media channel in April 2016, with a completion price of 22 million RMB (Han, 2016).

Paid Content

Though most content of We-media is free to its audiences, some We-media still offer premium content that users can access for a fee. This includes, for example, subscription models, where users pay regularly for exclusive content, and pay-per-article systems. For example, one popular We-media app called “Get” (Dedao, 得到) was launched in May 2016 by a famous influencer We-media owner, *Luoji Thinking*. This platform is more like an educational app, offering professional knowledge. Many We-media content providers use this platform to publish paid audio content. For example, Luoji Thinking post a 60-120 seconds audio daily to their audiences about various practical ideas and thoughts on modern society. The audio content subsumes selected book reviews and historical stories associated with public affairs contemporarily (Sohu, 2020). Another similar app, called Ximalaya, also provides paid content in the form of audio courses. Audiences can buy these courses, which usually cost under 200 CNY, often accompanied by discount promotions, or the app may provide free or low-cost audio to attract users to place orders (TanglangFin, 2020).

However, many scholars question whether this is a sustainable model for We-media (Xia, 2017; Brandstetter and Schmalhofer 2014; Pickard and Williams 2014). According to the annual report of *The New List* (2017), only 29.5% of We-media users had ever purchased any paid content online, and less than 20% of them had ever purchased paid products two to four times, while the percentage declined to less than

2% for those who had ever purchased paid products more than five times (The New list, 2017). A sustainable economic model for media needs to be based on a comprehensive revenue strategy that incorporates both paid content and online and mobile advertising (Pavlik 2013).

VIP Memberships

Some We-media set up VIP memberships that offer special privileges, such as early access to content, ad-free experiences, and exclusive interactions with content creators. These memberships generate recurring revenue by leveraging the loyalty and engagement of dedicated fans. We-media users can choose to pay the membership fee and become VIP members of the We-media they prefer and get the specific or exclusive content for members only. For example, some We-media create a paywall for some clients who wish to enjoy customised content or some specific information (Pavlik 2013). One way is through paid reading which was mentioned above, and VIP membership is another way for audiences to get special content (Zhang & Li, 2017).

Besides customised content, VIP members can also enjoy other benefits, such as attending offline activities. The most typical case of We-media membership activities was held by *Luoji Thinking* in 2013. The owner of this We-media, Luo Zhenyu, held an activity to recruit members for his *Wechat official accounts* that were being set up eight months later. The total 5,500 quota sold out within six hours, which led *Luoji Thinking* to earn more than 1.6 million CNY (Zeng & Wang, 2016). *Luoji Thinking* also held a series of offline seminars and the maximum ticket price was up to 13,998 CNY, while their fans rushed to sign up for these activities (Zeng & Wang, 2016). Witnessing the success of Luoji Thinking's membership drive, many other We media have started to use membership to make a profit in recent years.

Profit-Sharing Models

This monetised mechanism is mostly suitable for platform-signed We-media. Sharing a portion of their revenue with content creators based on the amount of attention their content attracts can incentivise creators to produce high-quality, engaging content (Xu, 2017; Zhang & Li, 2017). In this business model, both big media corporations and

individual We-media owners are benefiting from their cooperation. High quality We-media products can bring the audience's attention and network traffic to these big media platforms, while We-media can take advantage of these big media platforms to absorb the audiences into their own We-media channels directly and bring increased advertising and profit (Xia, 2017).

E-commerce Integration

E-commerce has become increasingly important in recent years. By incorporating shopping features directly into their content, We-media content providers can monetise attention through product placements, affiliate marketing, and direct sales.

Among these five available business models, three of them – advertising, paid reading, and VIP membership – can be categorised into the “direct profit model” (Zeng & Wang, 2016) whereby We-media content providers can earn revenues directly from how much they get paid. Another two profit models – the profit sharing and e-commerce models – are more likely to bring economic bargains indirectly. Essentially, the main component of their business drive is to attract and manipulate audiences' attention, constituting “the foundation for subscription and advertising revenue” (Chyi & Tenenboim, 2017). Moreover, these five available financial resources are all suitable for individual and group We-media, as well as platform-signed We-media, while the latter can get more shared profits due to their cooperation with the platforms.

5.4 The Tension between Independence and Stability in the We-media

By identifying the key features of We-media in China in terms of the categorisation and the impact of their content creation, a key tension can be elicited, namely, between the need for independence of content creation and the quest for financial stability. By and large, this tension can be seen as the rationale for each practitioner to determine how to form, change, develop their practices in their We-media account.

Independent We-media practitioners cherish their autonomy, leveraging it to engage audiences on a personal level with less external constraints. However, this freedom often comes at the expense of financial instability and reliance on unpredictable

income sources such as audience contributions and ad-hoc sponsorships. Conversely, platform-signed We-media entities benefit from more stable and predictable income streams facilitated by structured agreements with major digital platforms. These agreements provide technical and promotional support, significantly enhancing the reach and impact of their content (Xia, 2017). Yet, this stability is counterbalanced by the necessity to conform to platform guidelines and editorial oversight, which can stifle creativity and limit the range of topics they can cover. Moreover, this dichotomy highlights the strategic decisions We-media practitioners must make to balance creative freedom and financial security.

5.4.1 Independence: Creative Freedom at the Cost of Financial Instability

According to the fieldwork findings, the two We-media practitioners who have not signed contracts with platforms believe they enjoy greater independence and creative freedom compared to those tied to platform contracts. This autonomy allows them to engage with their audience on personal terms, choosing topics that resonate deeply with their interests and those of their followers. This personal engagement can build strong, loyal audience communities. One interviewee who runs a We-media account independently on the *WeChat official Accounts Platform* has shared her thoughts on urban living experiences and social issues since 2018. She values the creative freedom and independence that comes from not being tied to any digital platform rules, despite obeying the basic platform credit system. “I enjoy the ability to choose my own topics, creating content that resonates with my personal interests, and engage directly with the audiences without external constraints” (IE-04, 2022).

However, independent creators face more challenges in achieving income stability due to the lack of consistent financial and technical support. Without the backing of major platforms, they often rely on less predictable income sources such as direct audience tips, ad-hoc sponsorships, and freelance opportunities (Gill, 2018). These sources can be volatile, making it difficult to sustain a steady income (Lobato, 2016). As one independent We-media creator said, “I have to constantly look for new sponsorship deals and rely on my audience's generosity. There are months when I struggle to make ends meet, especially when ad revenues are low or sponsorships are hard to come by” (IE-11, 2022).

These two cases highlight the trade-off between creative freedom and financial stability for independent We-media practitioners. While they enjoy the liberty to create content without platform constraints, they often struggle with inconsistent and unpredictable income streams.

5.4.2 Stability: Financial Predictability with Constraints on Creation

In contrast, platform-signed We-media generally have more stable income streams owing to the supports and structured agreements provided by the digital platforms. As mentioned in Chapter 4, some agreements are often part of the platform support projects, such as the “*Mangzhong project*” of *Tencent*, which includes revenue-sharing models, guaranteed minimum payments, and access to advanced analytics and promotional features (Tencent, 2017). These supports can significantly enhance the reach and impact of We-media content, helping them attract larger audiences and secure higher revenues. Similarly, platforms like *Today Toutiao* (今日头条) and *Bai Jiahao* (百家号) have also issued a series of preferential measures, such as providing copyright fees and subsidies, journalistic skills training and free editing services to encourage more existing We-media practitioners to register and sign contracts with them (IE-18, 2022). After signing up with the platforms, We-media owners are regularly invited to post high-quality stories on the platforms, sometimes with specific topics and requirements set by the platforms, with the promise to increase exposure and direct traffic to their content (IE-17, 2022).

However, the stability provided by platform agreements comes at the cost of creative freedom. One interviewee, who had been a platform registered We-media content provider since 2016, mentioned benefiting from the preferential measures from social media platforms which help attract audiences and attention. However, he is also aware of the restrictions that independent We-media do not face. His content must conform to platform guidelines and editorial policies (IE-3, 2022). Especially for We-media accounts with a large number of followers, platforms offer one-to-one editorial team services (IE-1,3, 6, 17, 2022).

This so-called editorial support involves two functions. First, it provides pre-publication review. We-media practitioners can send their content to editorial teams for pre-

checking and reviewing before publication. This step ensures that the content complies with platform guidelines and avoids sensitive topics (IE-1, 17, 2022). Second, the editorial teams give We-media guidance and advice, providing feedback on whether information is inappropriate, suggesting deletions or changes as necessary. They also share information about sensitive topics and trending events, helping creators stay ahead of potential issues (IE- 3, 6, 2022). This service is essential for maintaining compliance with the platform's policies, but it also imposes a level of content control that can affect the creation process. In particular, many interviewees mentioned that advice and reminders from editorial teams have become more frequent in recent years (IE-1,2, 3, 7, 2022). While this interviewee also mentioned that having agreed to cooperate with the platform editorial teams and revise content as they required, on many occasions the teams would promise to promote their content on the front page. "To develop our We-media, it is necessary to maintain a good relationship with them" (IE-6, 2022).

Additionally, many interviewees mentioned that another reason they accept the editorial support of the platforms is that it can help them to manage content risks (IE-1, 3, 12,15, 2022). They are aware that certain content or keywords cannot be published. However, the exact lists of the keywords for each platform are not publicly available, and change frequently. "Some terms, such as Xinjiang, Tibet, Hongkong protects, are known taboo subjects. But in most cases, the forbidden keywords are very unclear" (IE-12, 2022). From this perspective, the editorial teams established by platforms can address this uncertainty. Editorial teams help both platforms and We-media content creators avoid inadvertently crossing red lines by providing ongoing guidance and updates about restricted content areas.

Moreover, interviewees working for social media platforms confirmed the existence of editorial team services and added that editorial team members often have connections or personal networks with traditional news organisations or propaganda officials. This allows them to access "inside information" about banning orders or forbidden topics (IE-8,9, 2022). As one interviewee addresses,

"These people, especially those working 'in the systems' or for the party media, have ways to learn about the information on

restricted topics and encouraged content first. These big media giants like *Sina* and *Tencent* might also be informed in the first instance. Although we never receive official orders, only this kind of ‘inside information’ shared through personal networks via peer-to-peer conversations or private messages. We then share this information with We-media practitioners we cooperate with. Some information remains unclear and uncertain, but to avoid any risks, we would give We-media content providers our suggestions and reminders just in case” (IE-9, 2022).

From the fieldwork findings, the editorial oversight provided by platforms to We-media practitioners is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it offers essential support for ensuring compliance with regulatory frameworks, reducing the risk of content being flagged or removed. On the other hand, it imposes significant constraints on creative freedom, limiting the range of topics that can be explored. Moreover, this relationship between platforms and We-media reflects a delicate balance between control and cooperation. Platforms use editorial oversight to manage content risks while offering incentives such as increased visibility and promotional support to encourage compliance. The reliance on informal networks for information about banned topics further complicates this dynamic, highlighting the challenges of operating within an opaque regulatory environment.

Overall, the fieldwork highlights a clear dichotomy in the We-media landscape: while independent operators value their creative freedom and flexibility, they struggle with financial uncertainty; whereas, platform-signed entities, though potentially more constrained in their content choices, benefit from enhanced stability and resources. This dynamic underscores the importance of platform collaboration in the current We-media ecosystem in China, shaping the strategic decisions and operational approaches of We-media practitioners.

Conclusion

This chapter elaborates on the landscape and ecosystem of We-media in China, from a micro-level perspective. By investigating the We-media practitioners’ daily practices,

the chapter unveils the key features of We-media in China. First, We-media in China can be categorised as individual We-media, group We-media and platform-signed We-media. Although there are no clear boundaries among these categories, their practices, such as financial resources and content creation, are largely shaped by their categorisation. Second, from the perspective of their content creation, the chapter identifies three main factors: a) economic-profits motivation; b) journalistic professionalism; and c) government policy. Each factor has exerted different impacts on the practitioners' content creation. Third, by identifying the key features and conceptualising the ecosystem of We-media, this chapter elicits the tension between financial stability and independence in content creation. By and large, this tension has driven the form, changes, development or stagnation for each practitioner's practices in their We-media accounts. Further, as discussed in the next chapter, this tension also shapes a unique We-media business model in response to the state control in China.

Chapter 6. How We-media practise: The Strategic Diversification (SD) Model

The earlier chapters have discussed how the rise of We-media has transformed the digital landscape, enabling individuals to create and disseminate content independently of traditional media channels. This shift has been particularly significant in China, where the internet's rapid growth has been accompanied by stringent government regulations. The regulatory environment compels We-media practitioners to adopt sophisticated strategies to balance creativity and compliance.

Additionally, digital media platforms in China enforce their own content regulation, aligning with government-approved narratives to avoid politically sensitive topics. This dual layer of censorship presents a significant challenge for We-media practitioners, who must navigate these constraints while attempting to engage and grow their audiences. The dynamic tension between maintaining editorial autonomy and ensuring financial stability is a constant concern for these independent operators.

As explored in the preceding Chapter Five, We-media practitioners in China face a significant challenge: independent We-media operators cherish their autonomy, but they often encounter financial instability. Conversely, those who partner with major digital platforms benefit from stable income streams but must adhere to strict content guidelines that can stifle creativity. Balancing compliance with state regulations and meeting diverse audience expectations is central to managing this dynamic.

In this regard, how to adapt to this We-media environment and how to respond to state control over We-media are important, given their actions not only reflect the properties of We-media in China, but also show the interplay and dynamics between media and state. Hence, as demonstrated in this chapter, We-media practitioners have developed a strategic diversification model (SD) to balance these competing demands. This chapter explores how this model enables them to navigate the competing demands of regulatory compliance and audience engagement. By elucidating the mechanisms and strategies embedded in the SD Model, this chapter provides a detailed exploration of its theoretical underpinnings, practical applications, and broader implications.

To articulate what the SD model is and how it can be perceived as a product of China's We-media in response to the state control, this chapter contains three main sections. The first section outlines three foundational principles of We-media content strategies: adaptive content creation, audience identification and risk mitigation. These principles form the bedrock of the SD model. The second section explores the SD model in detail, highlighting how We-media practitioners balance state regulations and audience expectations through strategies, including employing multiple accounts, delivering content on multiple platforms, and practising washed content, which enable content creators to mitigate the risks associated with reliance on a single income stream with cost-effective content in a highly regulated and competitive digital landscape.

The third section provides two concrete examples to illustrate the practical implementation of the SD model. Through detailed case studies, this section showcases how We-media practitioners strategically use this model to ensure sustained engagement and profitability. The final section discusses the broader implications of the SD Model within the context of China's regulatory environment. It highlights that We-media practitioners, by adopting the SD Model, tend to avoid directly challenging government regulations. Instead, they focus on compliance and strategic content creation, ensuring that their operations remain within the boundaries of state regulations.

6.1 Adaptive Content Creation, Audience Identification and Risk Mitigation

The strategic diversification model in We-media is grounded in three foundational principles: adaptive content creation, audience identification, and risk mitigation. These principles are essential for We-media practitioners to navigate the complex landscape of digital content creation under stringent regulatory environments.

6.1.1 Adaptive Content Creation

Among them, adaptive content creation involves tailoring content to meet the specific needs, preferences, and behaviours of different audience segments (Blank, 2013). It

is a core component of an effective content strategy, which encompasses the planning, development, and management of content throughout its lifecycle (Baker, 1997). This approach ensures that content production aligns with organisational goals, serving as a valuable business asset rather than a mere necessity (Gollner, 2010; (Halvorson & Rach, 2012).

In the realm of digital media, this concept is significant because it ensures that content remains relevant, engaging and effective across various platforms and demographics (Gustafson, 2015). As the digital landscape becomes increasingly fragmented, with users accessing content through multiple devices and platforms (Picard, 2011), the ability to deliver personalised and relevant content becomes a critical factor for success. By adapting content to suit the diverse characteristics of its audience, media providers can maximise their reach and impact, thus enhancing user engagement and satisfaction (Wachter-Boettcher, 2012).

Oestreicher-Singer and Zalmanson (2013) explore the strategic approaches that content providers adopt in the digital age, particularly focusing on the interplay between content creation and community engagement. They highlight that successful digital business strategies integrate both high-quality content creation and active community engagement. High-quality, relevant content meets the needs and interests of the audience, while community engagement builds an engaged community around this content, such as through forums and comment sections, increasing user interaction. According to Oestreicher-Singer and Zalmanson, high-quality content attracts users, while a strong community retains them by fostering engagement and loyalty, therefore, creating a long-term lifecycle of content.

For content providers, particularly We-media practitioners in China, adopting a strategy that combines adaptive content creation with active community engagement can help navigate the complex regulatory environment and dynamic market demands. By tailoring content to audience needs and fostering an engaged community, We-media can enhance their relevance, drive engagement, and achieve sustainable growth. At the core of this approach is the need to effectively identify the audience.

6.1.2 Audience Identification

The concept of audience identification involves understanding “who the audience is, what they want, and how they interact with content” (Baker, 1997, pp. 322-324). Effective audience identification allows content creators to segment their audience into distinct groups based on various attributes such as age, gender, location, occupation, and interests. This segmentation is essential for creating content that is specifically designed to engage each group, thereby increasing the overall effectiveness of the content strategy (Kilgour et al., 2015, p. 337). For example, a We-media practitioner might create different types of content for young adults interested in pop culture versus middle-aged professionals seeking business insights (IE-9, 2022).

Methods of Audience Identification

Based on my fieldwork findings, three primary methods have been employed by We-media practitioners in China to identify and understand their audiences. These methods are crucial for tailoring content to meet specific audience needs and aligning content strategies with dynamic market and regulatory demands.

Surveys and Questionnaires

Many respondents shared that they routinely distribute questionnaires to gather demographic and psychographic statistics about their followers. These surveys commonly collect information regarding their followers’ age, gender, location, occupation, and interests (IE-1,2,14, 2022). This data helps practitioners segment their audience into distinct groups, allowing them to tailor their content to meet specific needs and preferences. For example, content targeting young adults interested in pop culture would differ significantly from content aimed at middle-aged professionals seeking business insights (IE-9, 2022).

Direct Engagement

Leveraging the two-way interactive feature of We-media, practitioners can directly engage with their audience through various interactive methods. For example, they can host Q&A sessions on live streaming platforms or directly respond to their audience’s questions in the comment section (IE-1,2,5, 2022). This direct engagement facilitates immediate feedback, enabling We-media practitioners to respond to

comments and further inquire about their audience's expectations and specific needs, This interaction not only enhances the relevance of the content but also helps to foster their audience's loyalty (Oestreicher-Singer & Zalmanson, 2013).

Analytics Tools

We-media practitioners frequently utilise analytics tools offered by platforms or third-party organisations to gain detailed insights into audience behaviours, content preferences, peak engagement times, geographic locations, and even devices used through the metrics such as “audience growth rate, likes, shares, and their average viewing time” (IE-1, 2022). By reviewing and understanding these metrics, We-media practitioners can tailor their content, posting schedules, and engagement strategies to better align with their audience's preferences and habits. This data-driven approach ensures that content remains relevant and engaging, thereby maximising its impact.

These three audience identification methods are integral to the SD model as they not only help We-media practitioners understand their current audience but also enable them to refine their content strategy to cater to their followers more effectively. By understanding audience preferences and behaviours through questionnaires, direct engagement, and analytics tools, We-media practitioners can allocate resources more effectively across multiple accounts and optimise their operations across multiple platforms. Also, detailed audience insights allow for specialised content creation that meets the specific needs of different segments, enhancing engagement and reducing the risk associated with generic content strategies. Moreover, with multiple accounts targeting diverse audience segments, practitioners can broaden their content offerings and tap into varied advertising opportunities, reducing financial reliance on a single revenue stream.

However, it is notable that the continuous process of audience identification and content optimisation is critical for We-media practitioners. As one interviewee stated, “Audience interests and preferences are not static. They evolve over time due to various factors such as emerging trends, new technologies, and socio-political developments. We must continuously gather and analyse feedback to keep pace with these changes” (IE-13, 2022).

But a more important factor, as emphasised by many interviewees, is to stay updated on regulatory changes and adjust their content to avoid censorship (IE-1, 2, 6, 2022; IE-13, 2022). Just as one interviewee stated, “based on feedback from our audiences and changes in the market along with the changing regulations of government censorship, we need to consistently adjust our positioning strategy and content direction, in order to meet our followers’ expectations but under the stringent guidelines set forth by the government authorities” (IE-5, 2022). Thus, staying updated on regulatory changes and adjusting content to avoid censorship is a critical factor for We-media practitioners in China.

The stringent and dynamic nature of the regulatory environment necessitates a proactive and informed approach to content creation and distribution. This involves not only understanding current regulations but also anticipating potential changes and preparing content strategies that can swiftly adapt to new guidelines (Parker & Gilad, 2011). We-media practitioners must continuously monitor government announcements, platform policies, and industry trends to ensure compliance.

6.1.3 Risk Mitigation

Risk mitigation refers to the process of developing strategies to reduce or manage the impact of potential threats to an organisation's operations (He, 2012). In the context of We-media, risk mitigation involves taking proactive steps to minimise the adverse effects of regulatory actions, platform-specific restrictions, and other operational risks. This principle is crucial for maintaining operational stability and protecting income streams. Especially in the Chinese context, it is essential for We-media to walk a delicate line in adapting their content to avoid being censored.

In this regard, diversification is a common risk management strategy in various domains. For example, in finance, Markowitz's Modern Portfolio Theory highlights the importance of diversification in risk management. The core idea is that an investor can achieve an optimal portfolio by selecting a mix of assets that minimises risk for a given level of expected return or maximises return for a given level of risk (Rubinstein, 2002). By spreading investments across various assets, investors can reduce the overall risk of their portfolio, as the positive performance of some assets can offset the negative performance of others.

Similarly, in digital media, diversifying content across multiple platforms can mitigate the risk of platform-specific changes or bans. As Napoli (2011) suggests, the digital age has led to the fragmentation of audiences, meaning that they are spread across numerous platforms and devices rather than concentrated on a few traditional media outlets. Media entities must adapt to this fragmented environment by diversifying their content distribution across multiple platforms. This strategy helps in reaching diverse audience segments and mitigating the risk associated with reliance on a single platform.

Napoli's insights on platform diversification align closely with strategies employed by We-media practitioners. By distributing content across various platforms with multiple accounts, these practitioners can reach a wider and more varied audience, thereby reducing the risk of dependency on any single platform. This approach helps protect against the loss of the entire audience base due to platform-specific regulatory changes. For instance, a We-media practitioner might use *WeChat* for detailed articles, *Douyin* for short videos, and *Weibo* for quick updates, ensuring that a ban or restriction on one platform does not completely halt their operations. This approach not only helps in sustaining engagement with a diverse audience but also ensures that content distribution remains resilient against regulatory disruptions.

In summary, adaptive content creation, audience identification, and risk mitigation are not standalone strategies but interconnected components embedded into the SD model. In particular, audience identification provides the necessary insights for creating adaptive content that resonates with different segments. Adaptive content creation, in turn, enhances engagement and compliance, making it easier to identify and understand audience needs more accurately over time. Both strategies feed into effective risk mitigation by ensuring that content is not only compliant and engaging but also spread across multiple platforms to avoid over-reliance on a single source.

The following section explores the SD model in detail through three features: a) creating multiple accounts; b) delivering content on multiple platforms; and c) adapting their content to reach audiences' expectations. In particular, it discusses how We-

media practitioners adopt this model to balance the need for creative freedom and financial stability with the imperative of regulatory compliance.

6.2 The Strategic Diversification Model

Based on the fieldwork findings, this study finds that We-media practitioners have adopted a strategic diversification model (SD) that leverages a multi-dimensional approach to ensure successful operation under the challenging conditions of stringent political oversight and dynamic market demands. This approach involves spreading operations, investments, or activities across multiple areas to reduce reliance on a single source and mitigate potential risks.

By examining cases of global media conglomerates such as Netflix, Disney, News Corp, Picard (2011) provides a comprehensive analysis of how diversification strategies have been employed to achieve business objectives. In particular, he categorises diversification strategies into three types, including horizontal, vertical and geographical diversification. For example, Disney was originally a film studio and then expanded horizontally by acquiring television networks (ABC), radio stations, and other film studios (Pixar, Marvel, Lucasfilm). In terms of vertical diversification, which refers to integrating different stages of production and distribution within the same industry, *Disney* owns film production companies, television networks, theme parks, and retail stores. Geographical diversification means to expand into new markets and regions beyond the company's home country; for example, *Disney* has theme parks in North America, Europe, and Asia, and distributes films and television content worldwide (p.201-248). Moreover, Picard emphasises how economic conditions in different regions affect media companies' diversification strategies. In stable economies, diversification might focus more on innovation and growth, while in volatile economies, the focus might shift to risk management and sustainability. K  ng's work (2016) also explores the strategic management practices of media companies, highlighting how media firms adapt to dynamic market conditions and regulatory challenges by spreading their activities across multiple platforms and content areas. While both K  ng and Picard's work primarily focuses on large media conglomerates, the principles of strategic diversification are highly relevant to We-media practitioners

in China, as digital commercial media. However, the unique political and regulatory environment in China requires We-media to adopt diversified strategies to mitigate risks and sustain their operations uniquely.

In this regard, the SD model adopted by We-media practitioners in China reflects a comprehensive approach. It involves creating multiple accounts and distributing content across several platforms to mitigate the risks associated with dependency on a single platform. This approach ensures that their operations are not heavily dependent on any single platform, which could be subject to sudden policy changes, technical issues, or regulatory actions.

To understand how this SD model functions within the We-media, this section includes two main parts. The first part explores the methods employed by We-media practitioners to identify and understand their audiences, which play a crucial role in the effective implementation of the SD model. The second part highlights three main interconnected components of the SD model: a) creating multiple accounts; b) delivering content on multiple platforms; and c) content washing as a cost-effective approach. Each component serves distinct yet complementary roles in achieving the overarching goals of audience engagement, regulatory compliance, and operational resilience, providing a comprehensive understanding of the strategies We-media practitioners employ to balance the tension between freedom of content creation and financial stability in China's unique media landscape.

6.2.1 Creating Multiple We-media Accounts

The strategy of managing multiple We-media accounts involves creating and operating several distinct accounts to cater to different audience segments. This approach is similar to how commercial companies manage a portfolio of brands or sub-brands, each targeting specific market segments or product categories. The primary objectives are to leverage resources and expertise across multiple accounts while addressing diverse audience interests and preferences. For example, some commercial companies manage a portfolio of brands or sub-brands, each catering to a particular market segment or product category (Picard, 2011). This strategy, as indicated by all interviewees in my fieldwork — including those working as individual or group We-

media practitioners — is a well-established approach in both We-media and commercial business contexts.

In the context of We-media, this strategy is multifaceted. It includes two layers: audience segmentation and risk management. The former refers to identifying distinct audience segments based on factors like interests, demographics, behaviours, etc., as mentioned, and then creating dedicated sub-channels with a specific editorial style or ideological stance to cater to each group (Guo, 2020). By doing so, We-media partitioners can effectively reach and engage with diverse and distinct audience segments with unique preferences and interests, allowing for more content categories and advertising opportunities within the digital market (Zhang, 2019). However, in the context of We-media in China, due to its unique political environment, this strategy of creating sub-accounts is more than simply about maximising profits. In addition to maximising engagement and profits, this strategy also helps manage the risks associated with censorship. By distributing content across multiple accounts, practitioners can mitigate the impact of potential content takedowns or account suspensions due to regulatory non-compliance.

Many interviewees expressed that their largest challenge is balancing the expectations of a diverse follower base with the stringent guidelines set by government authorities (IE-1,13,14,17, 2022). One interviewee articulated:

“We are walking a narrow path. On one side lie our audiences, expecting a range of diverse content that aligns with their interests. On the other side are the often vague yet restrictive regulations and censorship imposed by the government which set the boundaries of permissible content. Straying too far in either direction could lead to the loss of audience engagement or potential legal repercussions.” (IE17, 2022).

Likewise, another respondent complained, “Many times, we’ve had to pull articles that we knew would resonate with our audience but could be seen as crossing a red line by authorities” (IE-12, 2022). This sentiment was echoed by several other respondents,

illuminating the difficulty of serving two masters: audience engagement and regulatory compliance (IE-1, 2, 6, 7, 10, 2022).

Thus, this strategy is frequently employed in balancing state regulations and audience expectations. Notably, compared to individual We-media owners, We-media as groups can operate more multiple accounts. For instance, when WeChat initially launched its official public platform for We-media in 2012, individual We-media could register only two official WeChat accounts, while We-media groups were permitted up to five accounts (Sohu News, 2018). However, as of November 16, 2018, this allowance was reduced; individuals are now limited to one official account, and groups can register only two official accounts per business licence (Tencent, 2019). These changes set by the WeChat management team can be perceived as their effort to comply with the tighter regulations of the Chinese government, which could also impact the marketing strategies of We-media businesses who intend to utilise multiple accounts. A similar trend also applied to Toutiao (头条), another popular social media platform in China (Toutiao, 2018). Nevertheless, existing accounts registered before the rule change can be used normally and are not affected by the new registration adjustments made on November 16, 2018.

Despite these new constraints, We-media owners who wish to operate multiple or sub-We-media brands for varied content and services are devising alternative solutions. For example, one interviewee revealed that his We-media group operates more than two accounts on WeChat official platforms by registering a subsidiary company licence to apply for additional accounts or co-opt individual We-Chat official accounts (I6, 2021). However, these workarounds come with additional risks, including increased legal, financial, and administrative complexities (I6,9 2021). Moreover, regulatory authorities may monitor such practices and could introduce further restrictions to limit such workarounds if they become too prevalent.

But still, the strategy of managing multiple We-media accounts can be conducted as a way of content hedging, which can help We-media practitioners to navigate the complex landscape of digital media, especially in tight political environments like China. As one interviewee stated, “If one account is shut down or loses popularity, we can

continue to engage with audiences and generate revenue through our other accounts” (IE-17, 2022).

In summary, by distributing content and engagement efforts across multiple accounts, practitioners can safeguard against the complete shutdown or loss of popularity of any single account. It is a sophisticated approach that balances the dual imperatives of creative freedom and regulatory compliance. By leveraging this strategy, We-media practitioners can navigate the intricate challenges of their operating environment, ensuring that they remain resilient, adaptive, and successful in engaging their audiences and sustaining their operations.

6.2.2 Delivering Media Products on Multiple Platforms

In the approach of strategic diversification, distributing content from multiple We-media accounts across multiple platforms is a significant feature. This strategy allows We-media practitioners to harness the unique advantages of each platform, thereby expanding their reach and audience engagement while diversifying content formats. Moreover, it serves as a contingency plan against the potential repercussions of platform-specific restrictions or shutdowns. According to the Penguin Intelligence (2017), 58.9% of We-media content was delivered on more than four different types of platforms, with 15.8% of We-media content delivered on more than seven platforms. Moreover, 77.5% of We-media would not deliver the same story on different platforms. In contrast, they adjusted and tailored their content based on the characters of different platforms (pp.28). The feature of tailoring their content will be explored later in this chapter.

As discussed in Chapter 4, Chinese digital media platforms have a cooperative relationship with the government. They are responsible for censoring content on their platforms by employing both technological and human filters with platform regulations to ensure compliance with government mandates (Knockel et al, 2015). However, it is worth noting that these platforms do have a degree of flexibility in implementing censorship (Crabdal et al, 2013; Mackinnon, 2009). This flexibility can be conceptualised in two main aspects: operational flexibility and regulatory flexibility in censorship implementation.

Platforms' Operational Flexibility

Major digital platforms are given guidelines and broad directives but are allowed to develop their own content monitoring mechanisms (Ruan et al, 2016). This operational flexibility enables platforms to tailor their censorship systems to their unique features, user dynamics, and commercial strategies. These systems basically rely on keyword filtering and artificial intelligence algorithms to identify sensitive content, with human checks for flagged material if necessary (Knockel et al., 2015). Since each platform has distinct user dynamics and features, this necessitates use of tailored content monitoring systems to suit their users' needs and commercial strategies (Piskorski, 2016). For example, *Douyin* focuses on monitoring multimedia content and is entertainment-focused, while *Sina Weibo*, a text-based service, has more advanced algorithms for scanning textual content and is more news-centric (Xu, 2020). To address these differences, platforms develop specialised content monitoring systems. *Douyin's* monitoring system emphasises video and audio content analysis to detect inappropriate visual and auditory content (He & Tian, 2023). While Sina Weibo has developed a more sophisticated text analysis monitoring system, using advanced algorithms for scanning textual content, identifying politically sensitive or controversial topics (Vuori & Paltemaa, 2015). Therefore, platforms' operational flexibility is achieved through the customisation of content monitoring systems to suit their unique user dynamics and features. This flexibility allows platforms to effectively manage content in a way that aligns with their specific user bases and commercial goals. This variability allows We-media practitioners to navigate and exploit the differences among the different platforms to their advantage. By understanding the unique characteristics and censorship priorities of each platform, We-media practitioners can tailor their content to maximise reach and engagement while minimising the risk of censorship.

Platforms' Regulatory Flexibility

This flexibility, despite being limited, also relies on the absence of precise definitions of numerous government-issued documents and directives on the internet regulations. As mentioned in previous chapters, the government's regulations are often intentionally vague, acting like an "anaconda in the chandelier", and allowing for arbitrary enforcement (Link, 2002, pp.3-4). This vagueness creates a broader range of activities that the platforms must manage. However, such vague policies also leave

room to create “uncertainty” about what is permitted or not, thereby also granting digital platforms some flexibility in how they implement censorship (Ruan et al., 2016). This dynamic environment allows platforms to exercise discretion in how strictly they enforce censorship.

In particular, this flexibility in censorship implementation also provides platforms with the opportunity to align their content management strategies with commercial interests. According to Yang (2014), each platform has a slightly different set of "sensitive keywords" or prioritises certain topics over others. This means that content flagged on one platform may be less scrutinised on another. These differences create some room for sensitive or controversial content that can boost user engagement and web traffic. Higher engagement often correlates with higher advertising revenues and greater commercial success. For example, platforms like *Sina Weibo* and *Tencent Weibo* have been known to welcome and even embrace contentious media content related to sensitive or eye-catching issues, due to their commercial objectives (Yang, 2014). In this regard, platforms might be lenient on content that drives significant user engagement but is borderline in terms of acceptability. Another example is WeChat's dual system. As Ruan et al (2016) illustrate, *WeChat* app has adopted a “one app, two systems” model of censorship: *WeChat* accounts registered with a mainland China phone number are subject to strict content filtering, including keyword censorship, and the enforcement of rules against the discussion of sensitive political topics; while for accounts registered outside mainland China, censorship rules are generally more lenient. This dual system allows *WeChat* to comply with domestic Chinese regulations while also offering a more open platform to users overseas, thereby facilitating its global growth without falling foul of varying regulations in other countries (Ruan et al, 2016).

Practical Application for We-media Practitioners

We-media practitioners can exploit these differences by tailoring their content to fit the specific censorship guidelines of each platform. For example, content that is slightly altered in language or presentation can be published across multiple platforms to maximise reach while navigating censorship variances. As one interviewee, a We-media practitioner focusing on economic and real estate trends in China, shared:

“Every week, we deliver our content on more than four different platforms. While the core content about a given story remains the same, we have to adjust the media content, including title keywords and overall structure, to comply with each platform's regulations. For example, if we want to discuss the decline in Chinese house prices, given the political sensitivity surrounding economic issues, we must tailor the content. On *WeChat*, we post a detailed article analysing the house price decline from an economic perspective, avoiding direct criticism of government policies. Moreover, we use terms like ‘market adjustment’ instead of ‘decline’ or ‘crash’ to mitigate the risk of triggering platform censorship. On *Douyin*, we create a brief video summarising key points about the house price changes, but focusing on the potential opportunities for buyers” (IE-2, 2022).

By adopting content to fit platform-specific guideline and altering language and presentation accordingly, We-media practitioners navigate censorship variances effectively, maximising reach and engagement while ensuring compliance with regulatory constraints. This strategic flexibility not only enhances content visibility but also strengthens the overall impact of the message across diverse audiences.

This is a strategy of adapting content intentionally to remove or modify sensitive information and transform it into less sensitive content. This practice is prevalent among We-media when they produce content as they “repack” (IE-1, 2022) or “reframe” (IE-13, 2022) some political sensitive or controversial information in a way that aligns with governmental and platforms’ regulations, to “ensure the content is less likely to be flagged or removed by platform monitors” (IE-5, 2022). As one interviewee who is a We-media editor underscores, “In China's fluid regulatory landscape, what is acceptable today may not be tomorrow. We have to stay attuned to shifts in regulatory priorities, evolving platform algorithms, and changing audience preferences, all the while being ready to make rapid adjustments to remain compliant” (IE-17, 2022).

In summary, both digital platforms and We-media in China navigate a complex landscape marked by the tension between government regulations and commercial

objectives. Digital platforms operate under vague and often fluid censorship rules, which paradoxically give them some room and flexibility in content management. This flexibility allows platforms to align their content strategies with commercial goals while ensuring compliance with government mandates. Meanwhile, We-media practitioners exploit this ambiguity to their advantage by distributing content across multiple platforms with varying guidelines. By tailoring their content to fit the specific censorship practices and user dynamics of each platform, they can maximise their audience reach and engagement. This strategy involves continuously adapting to regulatory changes and leveraging the unique features of each platform to ensure content remains compliant while also achieving commercial success. In this way, both digital platforms and We-media are able to balance the dual demands of regulatory compliance and commercial viability. The next sub-section explores how We-media practitioners adopt a cost-effective strategy called content Washing for content creation.

6.2.3 Content Washing as a Cost-Effective Strategy for Content Creation

According to the fieldwork findings, this study also finds that content washing emerges as a dual-faceted strategy deployed by some We-media practitioners. The term “content washing” is translated from the Chinese term “*Xi Gao* (洗稿)”. Traditionally, it refers to the practice within the traditional media system where journalists write and publish articles based on information and news already reported by others through channels such as television, broadcasting, or being shared by colleagues, without being physically present at the scene of news events (Zeng, 2015; Chen, 2018). This practice is commonly used when journalists are unable to attend the location of the news event (Chen, 2018).

In the context of We-media, this concept of content washing is practised as a cost-effective strategy for content creation within China’s We-media landscape. Given the rigorous competition and the consequential need to manage multiple accounts, We-media practitioners must delicately balance the costs and benefits associated with the production of online media products. During this process, “a cost-benefit trade-off” (Roberts, 2018) would be an important factor to influence content and information production.

In many cases, We-media practitioners need to strike a balance between the desire for high-quality, informative, original content and the need to produce content that is more likely to save time and costs. In other words, because of this fierce competition and the need to maintain multiple accounts across various platforms, We-media practitioners must weigh the costs and benefits of producing their online media products in order to maximise economic gains. For example, they must consider factors including “what timing, how much manpower and what resources are required to create original online content” (IE-6, 2022), “the potential audiences of We-media channels” (IE-10, 2022), “the potential return on investment for each piece of content they produce” (IE-11, 2022), and “picking trending topics or evergreen content” (IE-13, 2022). For some content, particularly that which involves investigations, may require months of travel and interviews, thereby increasing the budget and costs (IE-4, 7, 2022).

As both Hassid (2008) and Roberts (2018) state, there is always a degree of uncertainty surrounding the process of producing media content with the complex regulatory climate in China. This uncertainty significantly shapes We-media content and influences the probability of whether media practitioners will pursue media content, and their behaviour in topic selection, as it makes it difficult to predict how popular a particular piece of content will be, or how much revenue it will generate (p.421). In this regard, as one interviewee mentioned, if the potential costs are high and the potential benefits uncertain, they may hesitate to undertake the project (IE-1, 2022); or if information is too difficult to access, an investigative story will not be successful, no matter how potentially interesting it is (IE-4, 2022). Thus, instead of investing time and money with uncertain results, many We-media practitioners are more likely to pursue stories that have a higher certainty of success with less cost.

Based on this idea, many We-media practitioners, instead of investing time and money on original content creation, quickly modify existing content to produce something that appears new and unique. However, among many We-media practitioners, it has been adopted as a type of plagiarism and the unethical practice of manipulating or altering online content for financial gain or other purposes (Fe, 2021; Chen & He, 2013; Liang & Wang, 2019). This practice includes plagiarising user-generated content (UGC) by editing, adding, or deleting portions to claim it as one's own work (Chen & Sun, 2020;

Ren, 2018; Chen & He, 2023), or directly borrowing story ideas from others and rewriting them without any citation (Fu, 2021; Nie & Li, 2021).

Since the development of We-media, the practice of content washing has even evolved into an “industrial chain” in digital China (Fu, 2021; Nie & Li, 2021). Various software programs and tools have been developed to facilitate content washing. These range from basic text editing tools that allow users to delete or modify specific content, to more advanced tools that use artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithms to generate and manipulate online data (Zhao & Chen, 2019; Liang & Wang, 2019). These tools can help bypass plagiarism detection systems of major websites and digital media platforms (Zhao & Chen, 2019), making content washing a streamlined and efficient process. “You can simply attach and insert the content into these programs and it takes just a few minutes to generate a new article” (IE-7, 2022).

There has been a rise in the number of individuals and companies offering “content washing services” for We-media or some digital websites for a fee. “You can rent these programs monthly or annually. The cost is affordable, at around 300 CNY per month” (IE-4, 2022). These services promise to recreate the content to make it unique and improve the visibility of online content (CCTV News, 2018). According to an investigative report by CCTV News (2018), some of these services are even offered by individual or group We-media content creators. In addition to generating revenue through ads on this repurposed We-media content, providers of these services can earn significant income – between 80,000 to 90,000 CNY, or even up to hundreds of thousands of CNY per month, solely by offering content-washing services (Ying, 2018 from CCTV News). This financial incentive drives the practice, making it a lucrative strategy for many practitioners.

Some scholars suggest that the driving forces behind the prevalence of content washing among We-media practitioners are the pressure to generate online traffic and an overriding focus on economic profits (e.g. Fu, 2021; Nie & Li, 2021). Over the past few decades, the We-media industry in China has been transformed into a giant player in the digital market. With the proliferation of We-media practitioners competing in the digital market, many have chosen to prioritise web traffic over other factors, such as the quality or originality of their content (Guo, 2020). Content washing enables them

to quickly produce high-traffic articles that attract clicks and shares, thereby gaining a competitive edge. This approach ensures that their content remains relevant and engaging without the significant investment required for original content creation.

Another factor contributing to the prevalence of content washing is the fragmented legal framework related to We-media. Up to now, there is a lack of specific legislation concerning online washed content. Since the emergence of We-media in the 2000s, no specific law has been passed relating to online washed-content in We-media. Up to now, in many cases, the traditional “Copyright Law of the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国著作权法)”, which was enacted in 1990 and amended in 2010, is still being used.

This law applies the concept of “the idea-expression dichotomy” to resolve the disputed and infringement issues, which presents a challenge in dealing with content washing in the We-media sphere. Specifically, this law is designed to protect literary, artistic, and scientific works that are capable of being reproduced in a tangible form. This includes but is not limited to books (including e-books), musical compositions (including digital music), films, software, and online articles (The State Council, 2010). Compared to the original law in 1990, the revised one has increased the upper limit of statutory compensation from 500,000 yuan to 5 million yuan and set a lower limit of 500 yuan (中国青年报, 2022).

However, the idea-expression dichotomy creates a challenge in addressing plagiarism, particularly with regard to “washed content” in We-media (陈虎, 2021; Nie & Li, 2021). The dilemma of the issue is that copyright law is designed to protect the specific expression of an idea, not the idea itself. For example, if an article takes the ideas from others’ work but does not copy their specific expressions like words, exact plot structures, etc., then it might be hard to legally show that it is infringing copyright. Moreover, even for some works that are deemed to be infringing copyright, the penalties are often less severe than the actual profits derived from the infringing activities (Chen & He, 2023). According to Article 54 of the “Copyright Law”, if the actual loss of the copyright owner or the illegal income of the infringer is difficult to calculate, compensation may be given with reference to the copyright use fee.

However, in the case of We-media and its specific business model, in which direct and indirect income can come from various ways including advertising, users paid subscription and tips, the rewards can be much higher than simple copyright usage fees (Chen & He, 2023).

To combat online infringement and copyright violations, on July 20, 2018, four major Chinese departments, including the National Copyright Administration of China (NCAC), the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), and the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), jointly launched a four-month “Jianwang 2018” (剑网行动 2018) campaign. This campaign was directed against online infringement and copyright violations, focusing on “online reposts of articles, video clips, animation games”, and in particular “online media, particularly self-employed accounts on social media such as Weibo and WeChat”. During this campaign, 4785 cases were recorded as “disputes over infringement of online information (侵害作品信息网络传播纠纷)” (NCAC, 2018)). A similar campaign was run again in 2020 (NCAC, 2020). Although these campaigns were regularly launched by the government, the impacts were limited. In many cases, even when some online content was identified as infringing copyright, the penalty often involved merely deleting the problematic content or imposing a minimal fine, and at most, shutting down accounts.

The same situation is also reflected on the We-media platforms themselves. Major platforms like *WeChat* and *Sina Weibo* have algorithms to detect and penalise media content that engages in content washing. WeChat Public Platform has also established a so-called “Plagiarism Complaint Review Group (Xigao tousu heyi jizhi 洗稿投诉合议机制)” which combines machine algorithms and human review. However, the punitive measures are considered “too lenient” (Fu, 2021, p35). For example, they can only discover and censor if an online article has high similarity with another, while advanced forms of content washing often evade detection. Moreover, even for some content determined as “washed”, the platforms mostly take action to delete the plagiarised article before any more stringent penalties are applied.

As discussed above, content washing in the Chinese We-media landscape represents a cost-effective strategy for content creation. By leveraging technological tools and minimal resource investment, We-media practitioners can produce high-traffic content quickly. However, this practice raises ethical concerns and highlights the need for stronger regulatory measures to address plagiarism and ensure the integrity of online content. Despite its financial benefits, content washing poses significant challenges to the credibility and quality of digital media, necessitating a balance between cost-efficiency and ethical content creation.

The three features as discussed above – creating multiple accounts for specific audiences, delivering media products on multiple platforms, and employing content-washing as a strategy – constitute the complete content of the practical SD model in the context of We-media in China. To further understand how We-media function within the constraints and opportunities provided by this model, the following two cases offer in-depth insights into how We-media conduct business under this framework.

6.3 The Strategic Diversification (SD) Model in Practice: The Cases of Finance Wuji (FW 财经无忌) and Fuguang Yuejin Media (FYM 浮光跃金传媒)

This section provides two cases to show how the SD model is applied in the We-media landscape, illustrating the model's effectiveness in navigating regulatory environments, maximising audience engagement, and ensuring content relevance and compliance. The following first explores how Finance Wuji (FW) embodies the core aspects of the SD model through its operations and strategies. Likewise, the case of Fuguang Yuejin Media (FYM) also reflects how the SD model has been applied in We-media practice. However, as will be discussed, the SD model is deployed by different means with different targets in each case, given that FW and FYM respectively have their own characteristics and encounter different challenges. Hence, when the SD model is applied, this model exhibits different forms.

6.3.1 The Case of Finance Wuji

Finance Wuji (FW), a We-media start-up headquartered in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province in mainland China, has been operational since 2014. The company specialises in in-depth reporting on domestic economic trends and business marketing. Over the years, FW has produced comprehensive coverage of notable Chinese entrepreneurs, including Wang Jianlin, Zong Qinghou, Wang Shi, Jack Ma, and Lei Jun.

Aligning with the SD model's first feature of multiple accounts, FW operates under a primary We-media brand, *Finance Wuji* (财经无忌), the same name as this We-media group's registered company, with four subsidiary We-media brands: *No1. Business* (Yihao gongsi 一号公司), *Business Battlefront* (Shangzhan xianchang 商战现场), *The Great Automotive Shift* (Qiche daluoyi 汽车大挪移), *Real Estate Hunter* (Dichan Bushou 地产捕手). Each account has its own specific focus and thematic content. For instance, the dominant We-media brand *Finance Wuji* focuses on critical analysis of financial policies and business events, both domestically and internationally. Its approach to content is similar to that of traditional press outlets, with a professional and expert writing style. Conversely, the second We-media account, *No1. Business*, focuses more on corporate investment and stock market, offering its audience investment advice based on stock analysis. The remaining three subsidiary We-media brands – *Business Battlefront*, *The Great Automotive Shift*, and *Real Estate Hunter* – specifically cater to niche markets like automobiles and real estate (Wuji Business Manual, 2021). Collectively, these five We-media accounts are present on over 40 web platforms, with a combined fan base exceeding 9.7 million and a daily click rate surpassing one million for their original content.

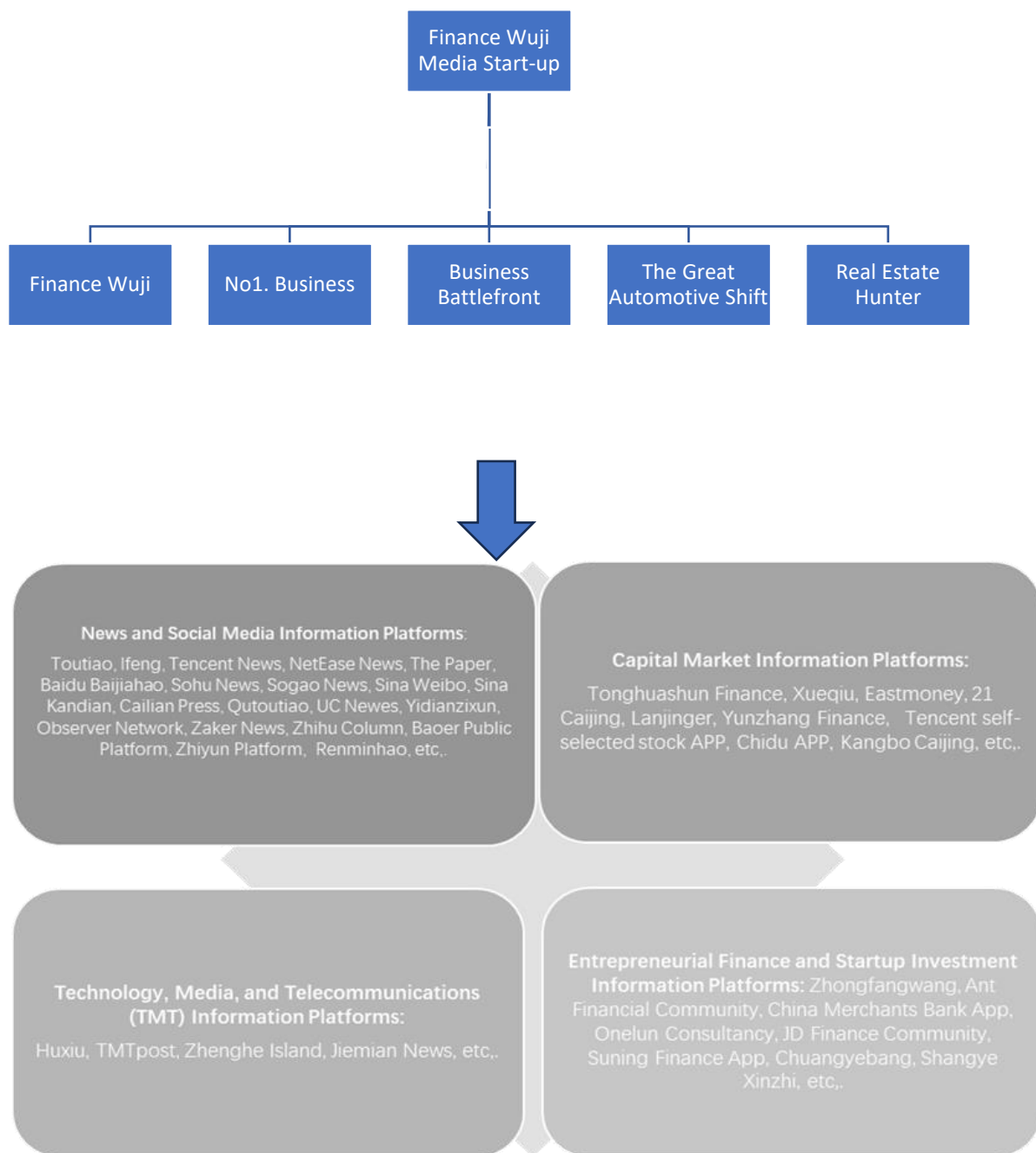


Figure 6.1: The Matrix structure of Finance Wuji

According to Figure 6.1, these forty Internet platforms are categorised into four main themes: news and social media information platforms, capital market information platforms, Technology, Media and Telecommunications (TMT) information platforms, and entrepreneurial finance and startup investments. These platforms are carefully

curated to serve audiences interested in a variety of content, ranging from social news to economic policies, innovative technologies, and startup financing. By leveraging these platforms and tailoring their content, FW can engage a diverse and targeted user base.

Targeted Content for Niche Markets

Operating multiple We-media platforms allows FW to cater to specific niches within the financial market. This strategy allows the company to provide targeted, in-depth content for different audiences, which can increase engagement and viewer loyalty (Tao, 2021). For instance, the primary We-media account *Finance Wuji* focuses on providing in-depth financial analysis for professionals and finance enthusiasts, helping to build a strong reputation. Sub-brands like *No.1 Business* target audiences interested in corporate investment and stock market analysis, serving as a valuable resource for investment insights. The remaining three brands focus on consumer-oriented sectors, like cars and real estate, attracting prospective buyers who are interested in automobiles or houses and looking for recommendations or market analysis. The varied target audience groups for each sub-account are complementary, contributing to the growth of the main We-media *Finance Wuji* account. The diversity of content also allows cross-promotion among brands, directing audiences from one platform to another based on their interests. This strategy not only helps in retaining their viewer base across the platforms but also in expanding their audience reach.

By offering specialised content across its five brands, FW is demonstrating a successful application of the We-media model, leveraging its broad appeal to cater to various audience interests while maintaining high content quality and relevance. Besides, this model is also attractive to advertisers, particularly those in the financial, automotive and real estate sectors. Given FW's strong and targeted audience base, many companies are interested in sponsoring content that aligns with their own brand or services.

Regarding the feature of adaptive content creation, FW also provides a compelling example demonstrating an intent to sanitise politically sensitive topics. For example, on November 8, 2022, FW released a three-minute video on its primary We-media channel, titled "The vaccine giant's stock price has soared, but why can't it retain the

interest of investors” (Finance Wuji, 2022). The video explored the financial performance of CanSino Biologics, a leading vaccine manufacturer in mainland China that reported a total annual revenue of 4.3 billion yuan in 2021. Notably, the video highlighted that CanSino's stock price doubled in November 2022 compared to its lowest point in the previous month, while also pointing out the aggressive reduction in shareholdings by both domestic and international investors. However, this discussion became significant against the backdrop of China's large-scale local vaccination inoculation campaign since 2021, when the government encouraged citizens to take the vaccine, driving growth in the vaccine market (Xinhua News, 2021). During the campaign, CanSino Biologics played a pivotal role, receiving approval for military use of its COVID-19 vaccine in 2020 (CNBC, 2020) and launching clinical trials for an inhalable version in April 2021 (Gao, 2022).

At that time, the Chinese government enacted stringent regulations governing the dissemination of information related to domestically produced COVID-19 vaccines. Both traditional and digital platforms were strictly controlled to ensure that only government-approved content reached the public. The We-media were also closely monitored by the platforms to identify and remove any content considered “false or harmful” about COVID-19 and the government vaccine campaign (Tang & Zou, 2021). Failure to comply with these regulations could result in penalties, ranging from content removal to publication suspension or, in extreme cases, legal action (BBC New, 2022).

On the other hand, at that time, any content about Covid-19 often generated significant web traffic and audience engagement as the pandemic remained a top concern for the public worldwide. To capitalise on this while navigating governmental restrictions, *Finance Wuji* took the strategy of sanitising politically sensitive information. Instead of analysing the political or health-related aspects of the vaccine, the video focused solely on the stock market implications surrounding vaccine manufacturers. In the video, they used publicly available data, such as the financial reports and stock market trends of CanSino, to show the “paradox” of CanSino's stock price increasing while the related shareholder holdings decreased (See figure 6.2 as follows).



Figure 6.2: Screenshot of Finance Wuji's video 'The vaccine giant's stock price has soared, but why can't it retain the interest of investors?'

By limiting the discussion to the stock market dynamics and financial performance, *Finance Wuji* managed to indirectly touch upon a sensitive issue without risking regulatory backlash. This strategy allowed Finance Wuji to engage with a highly relevant topic while minimising the risk of regulatory backlash.

Therefore, FW's application of the SD model demonstrates how We-media can effectively operate in a complex regulatory environment while maximising audience reach and engagement. By leveraging multiple accounts, delivering targeted content across various platforms, and adapting content by intentionally removing or modifying sensitive information, Finance Wuji successfully navigates regulatory constraints and meets diverse audience needs. This approach not only enhances content visibility and engagement but also attracts advertisers interested in reaching a targeted and engaged audience base.

6.3.2 The Case of Fuguang Yuejin Media (浮光跃金传媒)

This sub-section examines the characteristics of SD through the case of Fuguang Yuejin Media (FYM), a once-popular We-media in China. Similar to FW, FYM also

aligns with the SD model but distinguishes itself through a multi-dimensional approach that offers varying ideological perspectives within a single network.

FYM group We-media operates six We-media accounts, namely 90's Tonight (Jinye 90hou 今夜 90 后), Youth Assemble (Qingnian dayuan 青年大院), Yehuo Youth (Yehuo qingnian 野火青年), Yimu Youth(Yimu laile 姨母来了), Diqu Yewan (Diquishang suoyoude yewan 地球上所有的夜晚), and Life Evolution (Shenghuo jinhualun 生活进化论). These accounts all target the post-90s generation entering the workforce and cover a wide range of topics from social justice and politics to relationships and environmental issues (Lu, 2020; (Wei & Zhao, 2021); Zhang, 2021) (See Figure 6.3 as follows). However, each account presents a distinct editorial and ideological stance in content creation (Lu Shihan 2020; Zhang 2021; Wei & Zhao, 2021).

While Youth Assemble aligns with nationalist perspectives, closely mirroring the ideology of the CCP, Yehuo Youth's content pursues a neutral and balanced stance, offering objective and rational insights into social issues. This account aims to provide well-rounded discussions without leaning too heavily towards any particular ideology. In contrast, Diqu Yewan adopts a perspective rooted in critical professionalism, providing critical discussions on social matters. It focuses on in-depth analysis and professional critique of current events and social issues. Yimu Youth mainly focuses on emotional storytelling and relationship advice. This account aims to connect with its audience on a personal level, addressing common life challenges and relationship dynamics. Life Evolution concentrates on modern lifestyles and mental stress issues. It provides content related to personal development, mental health, and lifestyle enhancements (Fang, 2022).

Notably, Youth Assemble was previously known as 90's Tonight. The name change was prompted by a controversial article published on May 7, 2019 on the WeChat Official Account platform, titled "The 17-Year-Old Shanghai teenager decided to jump off the bridge" (那个 17 岁的上海少年决定跳桥自杀). The article faced backlash because it fabricated a conversation between the boy and his mother in this story, without actual interviews, causing widespread debate on the internet. Soon the We-

media account of 90's Tonight was suspended by WeChat due to false reporting. But four months later, it was relaunched under its new name 'Youth Assemble' on September, 2019 (Toutiao, 2019).

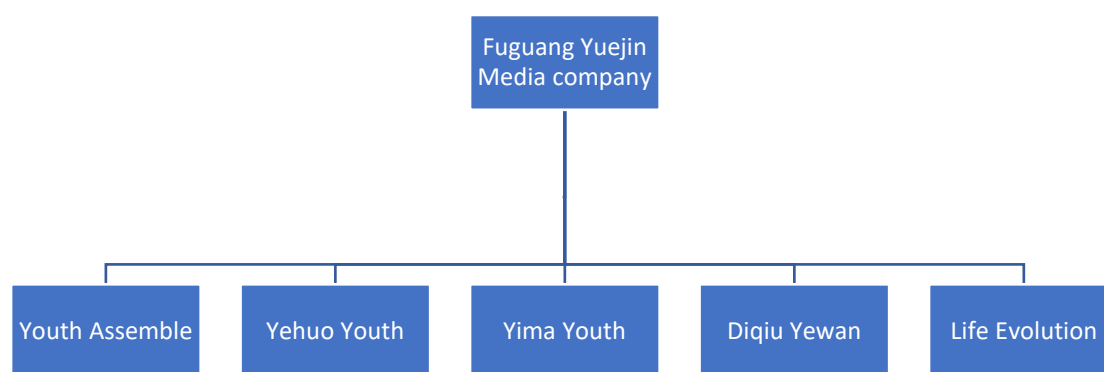


Figure 6.3: The multiple We-media accounts operated by FYM.

Distinct Editorial and Ideological Stances

Unlike the FW We-media group, which operates different We-media accounts with each focusing on a specific niche, FYM skilfully used multiple accounts to instigate debates from different ideological standpoints within the same news content. Among them, the accounts Youth Assemble, Yehuo Youth, Yimu Youth, and Diqu Yewan are particularly active and adept at producing varied ideological perspectives on a single story, tailoring the content and restructuring it to attract a broad spectrum of audiences with different beliefs and opinions. In some cases, there is an intention for them to create online conflicts with extreme opinions in their content, in order to increase click rates and audience engagement for economic benefit (Ao et al., 2023). Some Chinese scholars have labelled this strategy as “fighting between left and right hands” (Zuoyoushou hubo 左右手互博), or “viewpoint-confrontational writing” (Duichongshi xiezuo 对冲式写作), a risky yet often rewarding strategy to boost engagement metrics (Zhang, 2021).

To illustrate how this strategy has been employed, the following section examines the case of FYM, focusing on how its four We-media accounts framed their unique perspectives on the topic of "Covid-19 spreading to Japan and South Korea".

武汉的悲剧，我在日本看了遍重播

原创 勇博啊 青年大院 1周前



新冠肺炎74天，曙光终于乍现。

除湖北省外，新增病例迎来16连降。

连续8天治愈人数超千人，目前累计治愈人数16639例。

前天，全国治愈病例首次超过确诊病例。

疫情中的日本，不全是你想的那样

原创 田田熊 野火青年 1周前



「全世界，现在最担心的就是日本。」

WHO高级顾问此言一出，日本告急。

截至今天，日本已确诊712例新冠肺炎，为除中国外之最。

风口浪尖，人类命运共同体。

然而打开微博，心底不由升起一丝凉意。

没想到对于日本疫情，很多人都在看戏吃瓜：

开卷考试零分。笑话。

日本政府还不如武汉政府！

Figure 6.4: Youth Assemble: "The Tragedy of Wuhan, Replayed in Japan" (left)

Figure 6.5: Yehuo Youth: "Japan During the Pandemic, It's Not What You Think"(right)

韩国人，求你放过山东吧！

原创 捏捏本人 姨母来了 昨天



中国疫情，希望的光芒刚刚闪现，一件恐怖的事情发生了：韩国疫情爆发。

看看这个数据走势：
20日，确诊82人。
22日，确诊346人。
24日，确诊633人。
5天时间，翻了10倍。

就在我写文章的同时，韩国确诊数据一直在跳。
截稿前，韩国已经确诊977例。
看得我心慌。



韩国疫情有多严重？

我给大家做一个简单的对比。
韩国面积10万平方公里，人口5164万。
和浙江省大体相当。

浙江的疫情并不轻松，是全国第四严重的省份。
截至今天上午，浙江确诊1205人，但韩国目前处于爆发期。
超过这个数字，只是时间问题。

美国专家Anthony Fauci说，全球疫情面临“全面崩盘的边缘”。
如果全球都遭遇疫情，那最危险的，是韩国无疑。

韩国官方并不是无动于衷，禁止集会、延迟开学，封锁疫情最严重的大邱等地，集体出售口罩，人们压抑着恐惧去排队。
这一幕，想必你也似曾相识。



不要出门！不要唱赞歌！不要忘记正遭受的苦难！

原创 阿冲本人 地球上所有夜晚 前天



新型肺炎，已确诊77785例，死亡2666例。

这是我写这篇文章前，看到的疫情感染人数。

诚如大家所见，疫情爆发后的每一天我都在关注着感染情况。

短短一个多月，确诊人数从一位到两位，再到五位数。

Figure 6.6: Yima Youth: "Koreans, please spare Shandong!" (left)

Figure 6.7: Diqui Yewan: "Don't go out! Don't sing praises! Don't forget the suffering we are currently enduring! (right)

a) Youth Assemble: “The Tragedy of Wuhan, Replayed in Japan”

An article was published on February 20, 2020 on Youth Assemble We-media account, on WeChat Official Account platform, titled “The Tragedy of Wuhan, Replayed in Japan” (武汉的悲剧，我在日本看了遍重播)” (Figure 6.4). It was repeatedly emphasised that “Wuhan has paid a painful price for its complacency in dealing with the virus” and “history is now repeating itself in Japan”. This article took a critical stance on Japan's approach to handling the pandemic, drawing parallels between Wuhan's early challenges and what the author perceived as Japan's complacency. The narrative suggests that Japan is on the brink of repeating Wuhan's mistakes, emphasising China's strict measures and the consequences of Japan's "complacency"; this can all resonate with nationalistic sentiments among certain readers. As the article notes,

"We have finally started to see a glimmer of hope in the recent days due to our government's relentless preventive measures. Not every country can manage the crisis like China, which has implemented city lockdowns, halted transportation, and restricted movement. These strong state controls have curbed the spread of the virus. Japan, on the other hand, has become the virus's second target due to its negligence." (Yongbo, 2020)

The article concludes with a plea, "Please don't let China's efforts go to waste. Do not push East Asia back into the abyss of viral infections. Wake up, Japan; this is not a drill!" (Youth Assemble, 2020.2.20).

b) Yehuo Youth: “Japan During the Pandemic, It's Not What You Think”

Yehuo Youth published an article on its account on the same day as Youth Assemble, titled “Japan During the Pandemic, It's Not What You Think (疫情中的日本，不全是你想象的那样)” (Figure 6.5). Contrasting with Youth Assemble, this article argued that Japan was handling the pandemic effectively and questioned whether Japan should emulate China's approach, providing a balanced counter-narrative.

In particular, the article argues that “Japan is not doing any worse than we are” and “in fact, compared to us, Japan has three advantages that we don't have”. It came with

some analysis such as Japan having advanced treatments for Covid-19 and enjoying a top-ranked healthcare system and better medical treatments than China. It further questioned: "Although China has numerous hospitals, its overall strength ranks 64th globally. I wonder why it is suggested that Japan should copy our homework. What exactly should they copy?" (Tian, 2020).

Compared to the article posted by Youth Assemble, Yehuo Youth's article shows a willingness to present a more comprehensive view by offering a counterargument and challenging the viewpoint praising China's approach to managing the COVID-19 crisis. Instead, it supported Japan's approach and highlighted Japan's strengths in the medical sector, challenging the nationalistic notion of "copying Chinese homework."

c) Yima Youth: "Koreans, please spare Shandong!"

Five days later, on February 25, 2020, Yima Youth posted an article, named "Koreans, please spare Shandong! (韩国人，求你放过山东吧！)" (Figure 6.6). Instead of focusing on Japan, Yima Youth chose another neighbouring country – South Korea, and touched on the theme of cross-border movements during the pandemic. This article focused on the potential influx of South Koreans to China amid their domestic outbreak, raising concerns about Shandong's capacity to handle the influx. It highlighted fears and local impacts, appealing to regional and nationalistic concerns. It claimed that "China's epidemic control is just beginning to show signs of progress, while the epidemic in South Korea is exploding rapidly". Although the South Korean government had announced measures such as "banning gatherings, delaying the start of the school year, and locking down areas severely affected by the epidemic like Daegu", the article states that "compared to the raging epidemic, Daegu's medical resources are too weak." It goes on to say:

"Given South Korea's limited medical resources, it would be difficult to cope, and so something unthinkable has happened — large numbers of South Koreans are actively preparing to flood into China...Shandong, the Chinese province closest to South Korea, has become their first choice" (Ti, 2020).

It also highlights the rise in ticket prices for flights from various parts of South Korea to Shandong, emphasising that tickets are "hard to come by". The article concludes, "It seems that South Korea is no longer planning to copy China's homework" as they are not preparing to emulate China's epidemic prevention policies. Instead, "they're preparing to come directly to China and take credit for the work that's been done here!" (Ti, 2020).

d) Diqui Yewan: "Don't go out! Don't sing praises! Don't forget the suffering we are currently enduring!"

On the same day as Yima Youth's post, Diqui Yewan published an article titled "Don't go out! Don't sing praises! Don't forget the suffering we are currently enduring! (不要出门! 不要唱赞歌! 不要忘记正遭受的苦难!)" (Figure 6.7). This article criticised the complacency and arrogance seen in some Chinese attitudes, calling for humility and vigilance. In particular, it emphasised shared human suffering and condemned the idea of mocking neighbouring countries during their crises.

As Diqui Yewan noted, the pandemic has revealed "too much about the good and evil of human nature, the absurdity of management, and the unpredictability of the world". It particularly criticised two behaviours. One was "human numbness", saying that "even though the inflection point of the pandemic has not yet arrived, many people have already left their homes and started flocking to crowds". The other is "absurdity", claiming that "despite the numerous errors in China's own response measures, many Chinese are proudly calling on Japan and Korea to come and copy our homework". The article critiqued the slogan which Youth Assemble promoted about "copying China's homework" and emphasised that:

"When we were hit by the pandemic, what other countries gave us was comfort, donations, and goodwill. Now that they are affected by us, what we give them should not be arrogance, if not shame. Certainly not a smug 'come and copy my correct homework'." (A Chong, 2020)

This article takes a more introspective approach, criticising certain segments of the Chinese population for being complacent or arrogant during the crisis. By emphasising values like humility and empathy, the article strikes a moral chord with emotional expression, which can resonate with a broad audience and high engagement.

Thus, from these four articles from different We-media accounts from FYM, it is notable that FYM used its multiple accounts to present varied ideological perspectives on a similar topic. Therefore, the whole We-media group can cater to diverse segments of the audience, ensuring that a broader range of readers feel represented. If one viewpoint faces backlash or becomes less popular, other perspectives can continue to draw traffic. In particular, by presenting extreme opinions and creating viewpoint-confrontational content, FYM stimulates online debates and conflicts. This strategy, while risky, effectively boosts web traffic and audience engagement, achieving economic benefits (Wei & Zhao, 2021).

Overall, both FW and FYM exemplify the SD model through their strategic use of multiple accounts, targeted content creation, and adaptive strategies to navigate regulatory challenges. However, their approaches highlight different facets of the SD model. FW was focused on specialised niches by creating specialised content for distinct financial niches, which helps build expertise and attract dedicated audiences within each segment. This approach maximises engagement by catering to the specific interests of various audience groups. However, FYM was more focused on ideological diversification, using its multiple accounts to present diverse ideological perspectives on the similar story, fostering debates and engaging a broader audience. This method ensures that different viewpoints are represented, increasing overall engagement and traffic through viewpoint-confrontational writing.

Thus, the SD model is not just a theoretical framework but also a pragmatic strategy, finely attuned to the unique challenges and opportunities in China's We-media landscape, which involves both robust commercial opportunity and stringent regulatory oversight. The strategy — maintain a presence across multiple platforms and sub-channels — functions as a built-in risk mitigation strategy against regulatory issues. If one platform faces restrictions or a particular channel gets flagged for sensitive content, the impact on the overall We-media business is cushioned. Also, the

strategy of adaptive content creation further shields these We-media from regulatory risks and enables We-media to tailor their content to specific demographics and interest groups, thereby boosting audience engagement.

6.4 The Implications of the SD Model for Authoritarian Compliance

As discussed, the SD model employed by We-media practitioners in China encompasses a range of strategies designed to mitigate risks and maximise economic benefits. The key features of the SD model, such as creating multiple accounts, distributing content across varied platforms with refined, washed and non-sensitive content, are inherently designed to enable the We-media to avoid challenging authoritarian rules, focusing instead on compliance and economic sustainability.

First, the need to balance state regulations with audience expectations often leads We-media practitioners to self-censor and focus on apolitical or state-friendly content. In the case of FW, it focuses on creating content that adheres to financial information and advice, avoiding politically sensitive topics. The content is carefully curated to ensure it aligns with state guidelines and avoids controversy. This approach ensures that FW remains within the boundaries of permissible content, demonstrating an adaptive approach that prioritises compliance over confrontation.

However, FYM's case presents how We-media content creation effectively offers diverse ideological perspectives through multiple accounts, fostering debates and engaging a broader audience. However, this strategy can also lead to increased scrutiny and risks, if the debates are too heated and influential. It is worth noting that the FYM's We-media account Youth Assemble, on *WeChat Official Platform*, was shut down on February 28, 2020. Affiliated accounts "Yehuo Qingnian," "Yimu Laile," and "All Nights on Earth" also became inaccessible through WeChat searches. The official reason for the shutdown was a violation of the "Regulations on the Administration of Public Account Information Services for Internet Users". However, many show the real reasons were its extreme reporting and inciting of ethnic sentiments, particularly around sensitive topics such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Three of their articles related

to Covid-19 received over 100,000 views, indicating significant public engagement (Newrankcn, 2020; Wei & Zhao, 2021).

The case of the shutdown of FYM underscores the risk of engaging in extreme reporting and inciting ethnic sentiments, particularly around sensitive topics like the Covid-19 pandemic. It is also a reflection that while diversification can protect against platform-specific issues, it does not shield against broader regulatory crackdowns. Even economically successful and diversified We-media groups are vulnerable to sudden and decisive government action. Like one interviewee said, “These shutdowns remind us to become more cautious in We-media content creation and dissemination to avoid similar fates. Economic success and a diversified strategy do not guarantee safety from regulatory interventions” (IE-7, 2022).

The cases highlight a growing trend where We-media practitioners have to prioritise regulatory compliance over creative freedom and critical content. This can lead to a homogenisation of content, with fewer voices willing to challenge the status quo or address sensitive topics. They demonstrate that the SD model, while beneficial in many respects, cannot fully protect against the inherent risks of operating within an authoritarian regime. These cases serve as critical lessons in the importance of balancing economic ambitions with the ever-present need for regulatory compliance, highlighting the complexities and vulnerabilities of the We-media landscape in China.

Second, all We-media, including individual, group and platform-signed We-media, need platforms to deliver their content. As mentioned before, We-media platforms offer monetisation tools, algorithms that prioritise engaging content, readership, sponsorships, and even state-provided incentives. As a result, the content on We-media is often shaped by a combination of these economic benefits and the platform's dynamics, such as user engagement metrics, algorithmic preferences, along with the state preferences.

Third, the primary motivation behind the SD model is economic: by avoiding content that might attract government scrutiny, We-media can sustain their operations and continue to generate revenue. As a commercial media in the digital market, the main aim of We-media is to get profits through the “attention economy”, balancing

compliance with the need for economic viability. The strategies of self-censorship, content washing, multiple accounts, and platform diversification all contribute to this balance, ensuring that We-media can thrive without provoking regulatory intervention. This economic motivation aligns with the need to comply with state regulations, as penalties and shutdowns can severely impact revenue streams. Therefore, the drive for economic success reinforces a content strategy that avoids challenging authoritarian rules, ensuring that We-media can operate sustainably within the regulatory framework imposed by the Chinese government.

Consequently, the SD model encourages a content strategy that aligns with state expectations, thus maintaining a cooperative stance with the authorities. This alignment minimises conflict and ensures that We-media can operate sustainably within the regulatory framework imposed by the Chinese government. This dynamic highlights the broader implications for the We-media industry and the political landscape in China, where economic sustainability often takes precedence over political advocacy.

Conclusion

As discussed in the last chapter, We-media practitioners are largely characterised by multiple features including economic motivation, journalistic professionalism, state policy, and financial resources. Thus, their practices in We-media are largely driven by the tension between financial stability and freedom of content creation. How they operate their We-media and what strategies they deploy in response to this tension are the central questions organising the discussion in this chapter. In concrete terms, this chapter conceptualises the strategy that practitioners adopt in their daily practices in We-media as the Strategical Diversification (SD) model. The formation of this model is built upon three principles: adaptive content creation, audience identification, and risk mitigation. Guided by these three principles, this model adopts multiple approaches in response to the state control regime and market demands. These approaches encompass: a) creating multiple accounts; b) delivering content on multiple platforms; and c) content washing as a cost-effective approach. Each approach serves distinct yet complementary roles in response to a media environment

framed by state policies and market forces, aiming to achieve the overarching goals of audience engagement, regulatory compliance, and operational resilience. Given the significance and distinctiveness of the SD model in We-media, this chapter further provides two cases, Finance Wuji and Fuguang Yuejing Media, to showcase how one or several approaches are adopted in each case when confronting different scenarios.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Over the past two decades, China has undergone a transformative journey in the realm of digital communication. The rise of internet communication technologies and the development of digital media platforms have significantly reshaped the media landscape. We-media, a particularly prominent player in this arena, exemplifies the profound changes in media dynamics, especially under Xi Jinping's leadership.

Compared to his predecessors, Xi Jinping has adopted a different strategy for media development. One conspicuous change is the tightening of censorship in response to the rapid growth of We-media. Commentators often argue that this shift aligns with Xi's "strongman politics" strategy (Baranovitch, 2021; Miura, 2023), as he has consistently worked to consolidate state power since the beginning of his presidency. This thesis demonstrates that this shift is not merely a result of technological progress but also reflects a strategic recalibration of media control within an authoritarian context. Here, digital media serve dual purposes: as tools for information dissemination and as mechanisms for achieving economic and political objectives.

But to what extent do these changes and developments in media suggest that Chinese media is challenging the authoritarian regime and the Chinese government in particular? If such challenges tend not to occur, then what is the dynamic between the state and media in China? Answering these inquiries requires not only a new perspective and framework but also new research materials and targets. In this regard, the rise of We-media provides an innovative case to (re)interpret China's media ecosystem, the government's controlling strategies, and the dynamic between media and the state.

More importantly, this research shifts focus from the traditional approach that exclusively examines state policies on media to a closer study of We-media practitioners, particularly those who were formerly professional journalists. There are at least two significant reasons for this shift. First, an exclusive focus on state policy or state actions implies that media is merely a passive recipient of state directives, with the state entirely determining the media ecosystem and its developmental

trajectory. However, as this research elaborates, media, particularly We-media, is often active and autonomous, even within an environment where the state occupies a dominant position in the power dynamic. The initiative and autonomy of We-media are revealed through practitioners' daily practices, which reflect how state policies and strategies are perceived, interpreted, resisted, circumvented, or embraced. By uncovering these dynamics, this research provides a more comprehensive understanding of China's media landscape and the relationship between media commercialisation and state political control.

Therefore, this study focuses specifically on the rise of new digital media – We-media in current China under Xi Jinping's leadership. As a new form of commercial media rooted in the internet, We-media operates within an environment that has enabled its remarkable growth, contributing significantly to economic development while simultaneously being subject to increasing political control. In this context, this research examines the dynamics between the rise of We-media and state control.

Through document analysis of official policies and news, as well as in-depth interviews with We-media practitioners, this research uncovers the intricate interplay shaping the rise of We-media in China. This interplay is driven by multiple state strategies and the commercialisation of We-media. Most notably, this research proposes that the rise of We-media in China, despite increasing political control, is fuelled by the interaction of political and economic forces. While the state has established a tight regulatory framework to limit the extent to which We-media practitioners can pursue political objectives, these practitioners are far from passive. Instead, they actively respond to state-imposed constraints through a unique commercial approach termed the Strategic Diversification (SD) Model.

The SD Model, introduced and developed in this research, is a key theoretical contribution. It illuminates how We-media practitioners adapt their strategies to align with the state's regulatory environment while pursuing commercial success. This adaptability underscores a nuanced, symbiotic relationship between media commercialisation and state control, challenging simplistic narratives of opposition. By foregrounding the agency of We-media practitioners, this research not only enriches our understanding of the dynamics of China's media landscape but also highlights the

innovative contributions of the SD model as a framework for analysing these complex interactions.

In particular, the main findings of this research can be articulated across three dimensions. The first dimension examines the state's strategies regarding We-media under Xi Jinping's leadership. As discussed, driven by the dual demands of maintaining state legitimacy through economic performance and ideological discourse, the Chinese government has developed a sophisticated "growth and control" strategy for We-media. This strategy encompasses both stimulative and controlling policies. On the stimulative side, the government has implemented various measures, including financial and tax incentives, investments in technological and infrastructural development, and partnerships with digital platforms. These efforts align with the state's broader "digital economy" agenda, as the growth of We-media contributes to China's economic prosperity and reinforces state legitimacy. However, this stimulative approach is carefully balanced by strict control measures to ensure that We-media aligns with the state's ideological and political objectives.

The second dimension focuses on We-media practitioners from a macro-perspective, exploring their motivations, features, and content production strategies. This research introduces the SD Model, which provides a theoretical framework to explain how We-media practitioners navigate the complex interplay between commercial success, audience expectations, and political compliance. It demonstrates how adaptive content creation, audience targeting, and risk management work in tandem to achieve this balance. This study highlights three key features of the SD approach: a) establishing multiple accounts to serve different audience segments; b) disseminating content across diverse platforms to maximise reach and minimise risks associated with over-reliance on a single platform; and c) implementing a cost-efficient content-washing strategy to ensure content complies with state regulations while remaining commercially viable. This model not only highlights the agency of We-media practitioners but also showcases their innovative strategies in responding to the challenges posed by state control and commercialisation pressures.

In the final dimension, this study explores the relationship between media commercialisation and political control in Xi Jinping's era, uncovering a dynamic

interplay where market and political forces mutually shape one another. Contrary to conventional narratives that portray these forces as inherently oppositional, this study reveals a more nuanced relationship. It emphasises that in Xi Jinping's China, market forces and political control are not necessarily in conflict but often complement each other. The strategies employed by We-media practitioners demonstrate that commercial viability can coexist with, and even support, political governance objectives. Practitioners achieve this alignment through carefully navigating state-imposed constraints, producing engaging yet compliant content that meets both market demands and political expectations.

7.1 The Contribution of This Research

This research explores the rise of We-media within the broader context of media commercialisation versus state control, unveiling the complex dynamics underpinning its development and its multifaceted relationship with state strategies. By doing so, it contributes to existing studies in four key ways.

7.1.1 Defining We-media and conceptualising its rise

The first contribution of this research lies in defining We-media within the Chinese context and conceptualizing its trajectory of development. While concepts such as “grassroots journalism,” or “We the media” (e.g. Gillmor, 2006; Glasser, 1999; Lasica, 2003) exhibit similarities to We-media, these frameworks fail to fully encapsulate the unique socio-political dynamics shaping We-media in China. This research defines We-media as a form of user-generated media rooted in the internet, comprising a diverse range of digital platforms, including blogs, microblogs, live streaming, and short video services, that empower individuals and small groups to publish, distribute, and monetise their content.

This research conceptualises the rise of We-media as a product of the interplay between state regulatory strategies and We-media practitioners' responses. This conceptualisation answers the puzzle of why We-media has flourished despite the state's increasingly stringent control. As discussed, the state's regulatory strategies, comprising both controlling and stimulative policies, are not intended to suppress all media in all kinds of content production, but more likely to delineate a zone within

which media can thrive while aligning with state objectives. Hence, from the state's perspective, media growth can support economic and political agendas simultaneously.

However, Chinese media is far from passive in this dynamic. It has demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience when confronting state-imposed controls. The SD Model, introduced by this research, highlights the sophisticated mechanisms We-media practitioners employ to navigate state regulation. For example, the multiple accounts strategy, a key feature of the SD model, enables practitioners to mitigate immediate risks, such as content takedowns or censorship, by diversifying their channels and audiences. While this approach can temporarily invalidate some controlling policies, such as account shutdowns, it does not offer immunity from state intervention. This complexity is exemplified in the case of Fuguang Yuejin Media, which demonstrates that the multiple accounts strategy, while effective at distributing risk and fostering engagement, cannot fully shield practitioners from repercussions if certain political boundaries are crossed. As this case illustrates, state control remains an ever-present force, and violations of these boundaries can lead to severe consequences, including the shutdown of all associated accounts. Thus, the multiple accounts strategy mitigates certain risks but remains constrained by the overarching power of state control.

This research also highlights that We-media practitioners do not always stand in opposition to the state. Instead, they often adapt their strategies to align with state goals. For instance, practitioners may actively cooperate with the state to shape public discourse, such as by producing content that incites nationalist sentiment (Jiang, 2012; Wang & Tao, 2021). For many We-media practitioners, creating patriotic or nationalistic content is a profitable business strategy that attracts followers and increases click rates (RFI News, 2021). This voluntary cooperation underscores the symbiotic relationship between the state and We-media, where practitioners align with state objectives for economic gain.

Consequently, the rise of We-media cannot be simply reduced to a state-led model but can be understood as a complex interaction between state strategies and the agency of We-media practitioners. The SD model captures this dynamic interplay,

offering a nuanced framework to understand how commercialisation and political control shape the We-media ecosystem in China.

7.1.2 Conceptualisation of the state's (new) controlling strategy

This research contributes to studies on media control, particularly with respect to the evolving strategies employed under Xi Jinping's government. While many studies have examined traditional methods of media control (e.g. Brady, 2008; Eserly, 2005; Zhao, 2008). These strategies, such as structural, coercive, monetary, and decentralised controls, this research identifies a significant shift in both the motivations and mechanisms of state control in Xi's era. Traditional strategies - structural control providing the foundation, coercive control enforcing compliance through punitive measures, monetary control influencing content via economic incentives, and decentralised control regulating online content through intermediaries like ISPs and social media platforms - remain relevant but are now augmented by new approaches designed to address the challenges of a digitising society.

This research highlights how Xi's administration has refined traditional control strategies to suit the demands of a digital society. One notable adaptation is the increased reliance on decentralised control, a strategy that delegates censorship and regulation to intermediaries such as internet platforms and service providers. This method has become more prominent in Xi's era, enabling the government to implement censorship mechanisms that are agile and responsive to the dynamics of online content. Moreover, decentralised control not only enforces compliance but also creates a high degree of self-censorship among media practitioners, who must navigate an environment of pervasive surveillance and regulatory uncertainty.

Under Xi Jinping, the rationale and mechanisms of media control have undergone a significant transformation, reflecting new priorities and challenges. This research conceptualises Xi's strategy as a "growth and control" approach which reveals how economic and political goals are intertwined in Xi Jinping's governance. It is characterised by two key elements: the motivations driving the state's media control and the methods used to achieve it.

Unlike the relatively liberal media policies of his predecessors, such as Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping's administration has reinforced the importance of media as a means to uphold the Communist Party's ideological dominance and sustain political legitimacy. Confronting a slowing economy and increasing societal activism, Xi's government has positioned media control as a critical mechanism for addressing these challenges. This approach is embodied in initiatives like Xi's concept of the "China Dream", a vision intertwining nationalistic aspirations with political stability. Moreover, under Xi Jinping, the focus and utilisation of traditional media control strategies have been reshaped to align with the rapid advancement of digital technology. This adaptation reflects a nuanced approach to governing a digital society, where the control of media is no longer solely about censorship but also about shaping narratives and guiding the digital media ecosystem toward fulfilling state objectives.

Thus, in Xi Jinping's China, the "growth and control" approach adapts traditional control mechanisms to the realities of a digital society. In this case of We-media, the state recognises We-media as an important contributor to China's digital economy, promoting innovation and entrepreneurship - key aspects of Xi Jinping's vision for China's rejuvenation. Policies such as the Cybersecurity Law (2017) and regulations on internet content have created an environment where We-media platforms are incentivised to innovate and grow, provided they remain within the bounds of government oversight. This approach allows the digital media sector to thrive while maintaining tight control over its trajectory.

Beyond economic contributions, We-media is strategically utilised to disseminate CCP-approved narratives, shaping public opinion and reinforcing the Party's authority. For instance, to align with these objectives, the government has introduced policies that encourage digital innovation while ensuring adherence to strict regulatory oversight. In some cases, as discussed in Chapter 5, We-media practitioners are often encouraged or compelled to produce content that aligns with state-approved messages, such as promoting nationalism or showcasing the Party's achievements.

In essence, the "grow and control" approach is about striking a balance between allowing the digital media sector to expand and contribute to the economy, while ensuring that this expansion does not compromise the CCP's control over the

information landscape or threaten its political authority. This dual approach allows the state to foster digital media's economic potential while maintaining strict oversight to safeguard the CCP's control over information. We-media platforms and practitioners operate within a carefully demarcated space, where their growth is permitted but closely monitored and constrained by state-imposed boundaries.

7.1.3 Reinterpreting the relationship between state control and media commercialisation in China

Built upon the conceptualisation of the rise of We-media, this research offers a nuanced interpretation of the relationship between state control and media commercialisation. While extensive literature addresses this topic (e.g. Stokmann, 2013; Shirk, 2011; Repnikova, 2017), this research demonstrates a more symbiotic relationship. We-media exemplifies how market-driven media can align with state objectives, where economic incentives provided by the state encourage compliance and collaboration rather than resistance.

The SD Model, introduced in this research, encapsulates the strategies practitioners use to balance audience engagement, commercial viability, and political acceptability. By establishing sub-channel accounts, disseminating content across multiple platforms, and employing content-washing techniques, practitioners mitigate risks while maximising profitability. This approach underscores the adaptability of We-media and illustrates how commercialisation can coexist with—and even reinforce—state control.

From the state's perspective, Xi Jinping's governance towards the internet and digital media has sought to balance growth and control, as detailed in Chapter 3. Policies like "*Made in China 2025*" and the "*Internet Plus*" illustrate the state's commitment to fostering economic growth. Simultaneously, the government has tightened its control over digital media content, including We-media, to prevent it from becoming a platform for dissent or challenges to CCP authority. This dual strategy, combines economic incentives with regulatory oversight, guiding the behaviour of We-media practitioners. Evidence from this study's fieldwork demonstrates how the state uses mechanisms such as financial rewards and business opportunities to align We-media activities with its policy objectives.

From the perspective of We-media practitioners, many interviewees reported receiving economic incentives to align their content with state priorities (e.g. IE-1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 10,18). These incentives include advertising revenue (IE-1, 2, 3), investment opportunities (IE-2, 6), bonuses (IE-1,10), and invitations to governments or state-owned media (IE-7,18). Such opportunities encourage We-media practitioners to focus on politically acceptable content that is also commercially viable. Content aligned with state narratives or government initiatives often gains greater visibility and support, making it more profitable for practitioners.

Furthermore, in pursuit of these economic benefits, We-media practitioners frequently engage in self-censorship. They strategically avoid politically sensitive topics and employ “content-washing” techniques, focusing instead on safer and more profitable categories such as entertainment, lifestyle, and technology. This self-censorship ensures compliance with state directives while maximising commercial gains, creating a digital marketplace where content that aligns with government policies achieves higher visibility and profitability.

This study suggests that the symbiotic relationship between state control and media commercialisation explains why commercial media like We-media have not only survived but thrived under Xi Jinping’s rule. This finding challenges the assumption that commercialisation inherently weakens authoritarian control. Instead, it demonstrates that commercialisation and political control can coexist and even reinforce each other when carefully managed by both the state and media practitioners.

7.1.4 Advancing the Literature on Media in Authoritarian Regimes

This research contributes to the literature on media in authoritarian regimes by moving beyond the dated binary of net optimism and pessimism. Instead of viewing digital media as either a liberating force or a passive tool of state propaganda, this study positions We-media as an adaptive actor navigating the complex interplay of market forces and state control. It builds on works such as Repnikova’s (2017) analysis of media’s negotiated space in China, Zhao’s (2008) and Stockmann’s (2013) explorations of the party-state’s adaptation to commercialisation, while advancing the

discussion by introducing the SD Model. The findings reveal a distinctly Chinese model of media commercialisation, shaped by both market liberalisation and state regulation.

Traditional perspectives on media in authoritarian regimes have often portrayed it either as a liberalising force that facilitates political dissent or a passive tool of state propaganda. The former view suggests that media fosters public participation, disseminates dissenting views, and mobilises public opinion against authoritarian rule. Examples include *samizdat* in the Soviet Union, which played a role in disseminating dissent, and the use of social media during the Arab Spring to mobilise protests (Huang et al., 2019). Conversely, the latter perspective aligns with propaganda models, depicting media as entirely subservient to state control. For example, in Mao Zedong's China, the media was viewed as a mouthpiece of the regime, responsible for disseminating propaganda, censoring dissent, and reinforcing the official narrative. This view is echoed in the state-run media of North Korea and the tightly controlled press in former Eastern Bloc countries (Huang, 2009).

However, the advent of digital media and globalisation has complicated this binary view. Digital technologies have expanded the media landscape, creating new opportunities for interaction between market dynamics and state control. By conceptualising the “growth and control” strategy, this research deepens our understanding of how authoritarian regimes balance the competing demands of economic development and political stability. It challenges the assumption that commercialisation weakens authoritarian control, demonstrating instead that market-driven media can thrive within and even reinforce an authoritarian framework. For example, this study reveals that the Chinese state's dual approach of promoting digital innovation while maintaining strict regulatory oversight allows We-media to flourish economically while aligning with political goals. This nuanced view offers a fresh lens for analysing the evolving role of digital media not only in China but also in other authoritarian regimes that adapt to similar pressures.

This research contests the oversimplified dichotomy of media roles by demonstrating that media in modern authoritarian regimes often occupies a middle ground. Xi Jinping's China demonstrates a more complex reality, where media entities are neither entirely liberalising nor wholly subservient. Instead, they operate in a sophisticated

ecosystem, balancing state directives, market forces, and audience demands. This balancing act involves strategic alignment with state objectives while pursuing commercial opportunities. The rise of We-media in China, as examined in this project, highlights this approach. We-media practitioners strategically calibrate their content to avoid political risks while maximising audience engagement and revenue. For instance, We-media practitioners adopt strategies such as using multiple sub-accounts and implementing content-washing techniques to maintain compliance while expanding their reach. These practices align with the SD Model, illustrating how We-media adapts to navigate state regulations without jeopardizing profitability.

7.2 Limitations and Future Research

While this research offers substantial insights into the intricate dynamics of media commercialisation and political control in authoritarian regimes, particularly in China under Xi Jinping's leadership, several limitations must be acknowledged. These limitations also point to fruitful avenues for future research.

First, the limited sample size constrains the generalisability of the findings. The study draws on twenty semi-structured interviews with 18 participants, including 4 We-media platform managers, 12 current practitioners, and 2 former practitioners in mainland China, conducted between October and December 2022. While these interviews provide valuable insider perspectives, they may not fully capture the diversity and complexity of the We-media ecosystem. A larger and more representative sample could yield deeper insights.

Second, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and China's strict travel restrictions, in-person interviews were replaced with online interviews in this study. While this approach offered flexibility and allowed participants to engage in familiar environments, it had notable drawbacks. The lack of face-to-face interaction limited the ability to observe non-verbal cues, which are crucial for interpreting emotions and reactions. Additionally, political sensitivity surrounding the topic made it challenging to secure interviews with certain key stakeholders, such as We-media platform employees. Although document analysis supplemented the interview data, the absence of direct interaction with a broader range of actors remains a constraint.

Third, this research primarily examines the perspectives of We-media practitioners, providing a detailed view of their strategies and responses to state control. However, it does not fully explore the reciprocal influence of We-media on government strategies. Although this study highlights the agency of media actors employing the SD model and their potential to shape state policies indirectly, further systematic research is required to understand how these practices influence regulatory approaches (Luo & Harrison, 2019).

Finally, the study primarily focuses on the perspectives of We-media practitioners, potentially overlooking external viewpoints. Investigating the perspectives of We-media consumers and their interactions with content could provide a richer understanding of the broader societal implications of We-media. Additionally, comparative studies examining other authoritarian regimes could place China's media ecosystem in a global context, offering further insights into the interplay between commercialisation and political control.

Despite these limitations, this study provides an understanding of the complex interplay of media commercialisation and state control in China. It highlights the adaptability of We-media practitioners and offers a conceptual framework, the SD model, that can inform future research into media survival under authoritarian regimes.

7.3 The Prospect of Media in China

This research raises a critical question about the trajectory of media in China: is it reverting to being a mere propaganda tool for the state, as it was during Mao Zedong's era? While Xi Jinping's consolidation and centralisation of personal power, coupled with more draconian social policies, have led some commentators and netizens to suggest this possibility, the reality is more complex.

China's decades of economic reform and opening-up have transformed its socio-political landscape. Digital media, deeply integrated into global networks, connects citizens to the broader world, making it increasingly challenging for the state to monopolise information. Chinese citizens, aware of alternative information sources

outside the country's digital sphere, often use tools like VPNs to bypass restrictions (Khan et al., 2018). While the state has tightened control over these tools, technological advancements continually challenge its ability to maintain an information monopoly.

However, the state's role in shaping media development remains undeniable. The economic success of media aligns closely with the government's political objectives, such as fostering nationalistic sentiment and reinforcing political stability (Guo et al., 2007). The government's dual strategy of promoting market-driven media while maintaining strict regulatory oversight exemplifies how commercialisation and state control coexist. This study highlights that the media, as an autonomous sphere, recognises that its survival and growth depend on alignment with state policies. Collaboration, rather than contestation, defines the relationship between media and the state.

As demonstrated in this research, media in China today is a product of market liberalisation intertwined with state control. The commercial nature of media does not inherently challenge state authority; instead, it functions within boundaries set by the state, which uses economic incentives and political controls to guide its development. Xi Jinping's centralisation of power further solidifies this dynamic, as reflected in the state's use of media during critical events such as the COVID-19 pandemic to reinforce its narratives (Molter & DiResta, 2020).

Looking forward, the trajectory of media in China is likely to remain heavily influenced by the state. Media will continue to evolve as a commercial entity rather than as a vehicle for civil society or political change. The increasing sophistication of digital tools for surveillance and content regulation further diminishes the likelihood of new spaces for media-driven political liberalisation. Instead, the media's role will be defined by its capacity to align with and amplify the state's economic and political goals.

Overall, this research underscores the adaptability of media in authoritarian regimes, revealing how We-media in China thrives within a framework of state control and market-driven innovation. By conceptualising the SD Model and the "growth and control" strategy, this study advances our understanding of the nuanced relationship

between media and the state. It contributes to the literature on media in authoritarian contexts by moving beyond outdated binaries and offering a detailed analysis of how digital media adapts to - and collaborates with - state power. While the future of media in China remains uncertain, this study provides a foundation for exploring its ongoing evolution in an era of heightened political centralisation and rapid technological change.

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List of the interviewees

Interviewee No.	Former Jobs	Current Positions	Interviewing Date
IE-01	Professional journalist/ Financial news commentator	We-media practitioner/owner of a We-media start-up/Platform registered We-media content provider	October 2022; December 2022.
IE-02	Professional journalist/ Political and legal news reporter	We-media practitioner/owner of a We-media start-up/Platform registered We-media content provider	October 2022; December 2022.
IE-03	Broadcasting host/vice editor-in-chief of a local television station	We-media practitioner/owner of a We-media start-up/Platform registered We-media content provider	October 2022
IE-04	Primary school teacher	We-media practitioner/We-media as individual business	October 2022
IE-05	Forum website editor	We-media practitioner/We-media as individual business	November 2022
IE-06	Professional journalist on investigative reporting	We-media practitioner/owner of a We-media start-up/Platform registered We-media content provider	November 2022
IE-07	Professional journalist on investigative reporting	We-media practitioner/owner of a We-media start-up/Platform	November 2022

		registered We-media content provider	
IE-08	Vice editor-in-chief of a local television station	Editor-in-chief of a major We-media platform	November 2022
IE-09	Vice editor-in-chief of a Party press	Editor-in-chief of a major We-media platform	November 2022
IE-10	Graduated university student on journalism study	We-media practitioner/We-media as individual business/Platform registered We-media content provider	November 2022
IE-11	Editor of a website	We-media practitioner/We-media as individual business/Platform registered We-media content provider	November 2022
IE-12	Professional journalist on local livelihood news	We-media practitioner/owner of a We-media start-up/Platform registered We-media content provider	November 2022
IE-13	Editor of a newspaper	Editor of a major We-media platform	November 2022
IE-14	Professional journalist on global news reporting	We-media practitioner/owner of a We-media start-up/Platform registered We-media content provider	December 2022.
IE-15	Professional journalist on financial news reporting	We-media practitioner/owner of a We-media start-up/Platform	December 2022.

		registered We-media content provider	
IE-16	Editor of a newspaper	Editor of a major We-media platform	December 2022.
IE-17	Professional journalist on investigative news reporting	We-media practitioner/owner of a We-media start-up/Platform registered We-media content provider	December 2022.
IE-18	Newspaper advertising manager	Senior executive of a major We-media platform	December 2022.