**Towards Democratisation?: Understanding university students’ Internet use in mainland China**

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# Abstract

This research explores university students’ use of the Internet in order to understand in what ways, if any, Internet use might be considered a contributory factor in the process of democratisation in China. The research topic is situated within broader debates about the extent to which the Internet might ‘democratise’ authoritarian regimes in general and China in particular. China is a country with a long history of authoritarian rule, yet some propose that the process of reform post 1978 demonstrates a gradual transition to a more open and democratically accountable system of government; a process that has arguably intensified since the development of the Internet. However the development and expansion of the Internet since the early 2000s, along with its penetration into Chinese life thereafter, has meant that the Chinese authorities have sought to control the purported liberalising tendencies that Internet technologies bring. Systems of censorship and filtering have been a major component in China’s strategy of managing the impact of the Internet. Principally censorship has been undertaken because of perceived challenges to the legitimacy and authority of the Chinese system of government, a perspective not historically divorced from student activism in China. University students in particular have arguably played an important role in protests and social movements in China. Not only therefore are university students of particular concern to the Chinese authorities, they are also technologically savvy and among the largest group of Internet users in China. Such users are also of course central to China’s future as they fuel economic growth into the twenty first century and will no-doubt contribute to the country’s economic and political stability in the future. In attempting to understand the democratic implications of Internet use amongst university students the research takes a grounded theory approach based upon six face-to-face in-depth interviews, one focus group, search and analysis of web content, and digital auto-ethnography. A total of twelve participants were recruited from three universities in the City of Chongqing, in the southwest of China. This thesis provides an original contribution to our understanding of how Chinese university students view the Internet in relation to politics. It produces a number of original findings that will be of interest to the broader community of scholars researching China’s Internet in particular and scholars who study the influence of ICTs on emergence and consolidation of democracy in general. These findings include how university students disengage from political activities for both practical reasons such as a lack of opportunity, or lack of interest and ideological concerns, for example, a revolutionary view of democratisation that democratisation has to necessarily be a radical, revolutionary process, and that individuals are powerless to bring such a revolution about. It reveals patterns of how different Internet applications are employed by an individual to achieve one goal and how a politically sensitive message travels through different platforms online. More importantly, it discovers that seemingly trivial online exchanges may nevertheless contribute to a changing social and political environment, albeit in ways that interviewees may not themselves describe as ‘democratising’. Provided with certain conditions, online entertainment and political disengagement can be a way to liberate, given its potential to distract individuals from the party-state propaganda, to create a plural ideational climate, and to increase discontent with the current system through facilitating social comparison. Participants’ joining and organising associations at private level online is found to cast influence on the real world and provides opportunities to practice skills of democratic citizenship. Those associations thus function as an emerging civil society.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

This thesis seeks to develop a nuanced appreciation of the ways in which Internet use by a small section of university students in China can be understood in relation to debates concerning political reform and democratisation in China. In particular the research aims to capture and understand the perspectives and experiences of a group of these Internet users in order to appreciate the extent to which democratisation as a process of transition, is occurring from their perspective. This chapter commences with an illustration of the core aims and objectives of the research, along with the rationale that lies behind them. It then provides a brief description of the historical and cultural background that contextualises the research topic. The third section identifies the limitations of the existing literature on the studies of the Internet’s influence in mainland China. Finally, the chapter sets out the structure and main components of the thesis in its entirety.

## 1.2 Aim, objectives, and rationale of the research

The core aim of the research is to better understand and contextualise the political impact of the Internet in mainland China from the perspective of university students within the theoretical framework of democratisation.

The explosive expansion of the Internet in China and the Internet’s democratic potential has triggered a heated debate (see *The Economists*’ special report series on China and the Internet[[1]](#footnote-1) and also *The Atlantic*’s China's Communist Party Isn't Really Afraid of the Internet[[2]](#footnote-2)) and also given rise to the proliferation of research (see Taubman, 1998; Zhang, 2002; [Hughes and Wacker, 2003](#_ENREF_43); McCormick, 2008; Lagerkvist, 2010) on whether or not the Internet is going to bring liberal democracy to China. This debate and research concentrates on freedom of speech and censorship ([Taubman, 1998](#_ENREF_80); Qiu, 1999/2000; Boas & Kalathil, 2001; [Hachigian, 2001](#_ENREF_38); Harwit & Clark, 2001; Tsui L., 2001; Walton, 2001; [Edelman, 2003](#_ENREF_24); [Hughes and Wacker, 2003](#_ENREF_43); Kalathil, 2003; [BOAS, 2004](#_ENREF_8); Gorman, 2005; [Fry, 2006](#_ENREF_26); Crandall, et al., 2007; Dann & Haddow, 2007; MacKinnon, 2007; 2009; [Weber and Jia, 2007](#_ENREF_87); [Palfrey, 2008](#_ENREF_65)), public deliberation ([Jiang, 2010](#_ENREF_44)), civil society ([Yang, 2003a](#_ENREF_90); [Yang, 2003b](#_ENREF_91); [Tai, 2006](#_ENREF_79)), or activism ([Chase and Mulvenon, 2002](#_ENREF_18); [Harp, et al., 2012](#_ENREF_39)) on the Chinese Internet.

The over-proportioned research on the role of the Chinese government and censorship portrays an uneven picture of Chinese cyber space, although the Chinese government does play a crucial role in shaping the landscape of the cyberspace in China. This research is one of the endeavours to understand the less-studied field of how Internet users use the Internet and how they perceive and articulate their use. These endeavours include *China Online: locating Society in Online Spaces* edited by Marolt and Herold (2014) which puts great emphasis on the connections between the online and offline worlds and the Internet users. In order to further understand the purported democratic impact of the Internet, a specific population of Internet users in China has been chosen as the primary focus of the research: university students who are young, highly educated, and politically active in the history of modern China. In order to arrive at the proposed goal, the research will achieve four objectives:

*Objective 1: To explore the lifeworld of* *the participants’ Internet use*

To understand the democratic potential of the Internet, it is of great importance to know and understand how people use it for ‘the extent to which technologies live up to their potential is contingent on the social and institutional contexts as well as how people use them and what they use them for’ (Chen, 2014). Internet use in mainland China has been investigated regularly, twice a year, by the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC, http://www1.cnnic.cn/index.htm) and once by Guo, et al. ([2007](#_ENREF_37)) with structured questionnaire surveys. The Chinese Internet is home to various users who utilise the Internet in their quest to shape their lives. Their quests and lives and thus their online experiences are too diverse for standardised surveys to capture. Therefore, such surveys sacrifice the rich detail of individuals’ online experience and also impose the researchers’ perceptions of categories of Internet use upon their respondents instead of understanding Internet use through users’ perspectives, providing an holistic picture of Internet use in China, or in several cities. The research investigates participants’ Internet use through open-question in-depth interviews and a focus group and attempts to categorise their Internet use by their perceptions and articulation of their experience. The categories and findings of CNNIC’s and Guo’s ([2007](#_ENREF_37)) research are compared with findings from this research in order to add context and nuance to the overall picture.

CNNIC is ‘an administration and service organization set up on June 3, 1997 upon the approval of China’s State Council and undertakes responsibilities as the national Internet network information centre in China’. It has provided biannual nationwide statistical reports on Internet development and also some special reports on particular Internet applications like online shopping in China since October, 1997. Its reports are based on fixed-line telephone and mobile phone surveys conducted every half year. Its population is the permanent residents aged over six in China and its sample size is 30,000. The sample covers permanent residents across 31 provinces, municipalities, and municipalities directly under the central government[[3]](#footnote-3). It is the most authoritative and authentic statistical report on Internet development in China and its credibility is also recognised by international scholars including Harwit and Clark (2001), He and Zhu (2002), Qiu (2003), Yang (2003a; 2003b), Michel (2005), Damm (2007), Ian and Lu (2007), MacKinnon (2009), Yip (2010), Wallis (2011), Leibold (2011), Deans and Miles (2011), Park and Kim (2013), Bondes and Schucher (2014), and so on.

*Objective 2: To understand how the participants articulate and perceive their online experience and identify patterns of political significance in Internet use*

Not only is the research interested in how the participants are using the Internet, but also it attempts to achieve an insider’s understanding of their online experience, how they make sense of their Internet use. A constructionist approach assumes that meaning is constructed ‘in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context’ (Crotty, 1998, p.42). It is important to note that constructionism does not assume individuals’ construction of meaning is independent of their world. Instead, it is through their interaction with their world that their understanding of the world is constructed. Structural and social constraints have undeniable influence on individuals’ construction of meaning. Therefore, three factors are crucial in shaping the participants’ perceptions of their Internet use. They are the participants, their online experience and the social context they are situated in. Objective 2 focuses on how the participants constructed their understanding of their online experience. Their understanding of their Internet use matters. For one thing, every individual is unique and they have both unique online experience and unique perception of their online experience. Their views provide fresh ways to understand what is studied. For another, individuals base their action on their understanding of reality. How an individual uses the Internet is governed by how they see it. Therefore, to better understand participants’ Internet use and its political implication in the Chinese context, it is of great significance to study how they explain their statements and actions. Furthermore, the research attempts to discover patterns of political significance in Internet use based on analysis of participants’ perceptions. Objective 3 will look into the world that influences the participants’ understandings.

*Objective 3:* *To situate and contextualise the findings*

For one thing, constructionism assumes that construction of meanings is situated in the social context. Social, cultural and economic factors play an important role in shaping individuals’ Internet use and thus the direction of the changes their Internet use might bring. For the researcher to better interpret the results and the readers to better understand the findings and to weigh the usefulness of the research, the thesis provides rich background information including the social and cultural background: the on-going transitional process and the Chinese political tradition; the development of the Internet; and the Chinese cyberspace the participants interact with.

*Objective 4: To critically reflect the findings within the theoretical framework of democratisation*

Since the study aims to contribute to better understanding of the democratic implications of the Internet in mainland China, the study reflects on the concept of democratisation, and some of the important conditions for democracy including political culture, free market, economic growth, civil society, political participation, political efficacy, and the citizen. The findings of the study are critically examined and interpreted within this theoretical framework. Conceptually, democracy, in this thesis, is defined as ‘a mode of decision-making about collectively binding rules and policies over which the people exercise control’ (Beetham, 1992, p.40). According to this definition, ‘the most democratic arrangement’ is a system ‘where all members of the collectivity enjoy effective equal rights to take part in such decision-making directly’ and the most undemocratic one is ‘a system of rule where the people are totally excluded from the decision-making process and any control over it’ (p.40). Democratisation, therefore, is defined as a process in which a society or a nation moves from one end of a spectrum, the most undemocratic arrangement, to the other end, the most democratic one. In practice, democracy refers to liberal democracy. Democratisation refers to the process in which a society or a nation transfers from a non-democratic situation to a liberal democracy.

## 1.3 Research background

The research topic is situated within a broader debate relating to the extent to which the Internet might help democratise China. China has a history of over two thousand years of authoritarian regime and dominance of authoritarian political ideas. There was a period in the history of China before the establishment of the Qin Dynasty, the first unified authoritarian regime, when the Hundred Schools of Thought flourished. There are also pro-democratic elements in Chinese culture. However, the dominant political ideas are antidemocratic. They emphasise unchecked authority instead of mutual checks and balances, social order and stability instead of conflicts, communication and compromise, hierarchy instead of equality, and the rule of virtue (the rule of men) instead of the rule of law. The dominance of antidemocratic and authoritarian political ideas has been established and maintained by rigid control with severe punishment, active promotion through the education system and the civil-service examination system. The centralised authoritarian regime persisted in China, although there have been repeated opportunities for China to depart from the authoritarian. It is arguable that the factors that have shaped the history of China and its dominant political ideas may continue to shape its political future.

The author argues that China has been undergoing a process of democratisation since the reform and opening-up began in 1978. In the area of the economy, there was a transformation from the command (or plan) economy to the market economy and increasing integration with the world. The transformation and increased integration resulted in dramatic economic growth, including improved living standards, and expansion of urbanisation, education and media, and consequently a more plural society. Moreover, it led to the decentralisation of governmental economic power and gave rise to civil society in China. To promote economic growth and to cope with problems that emerged in the course of economic reform, the Party and the Chinese government have implemented the according measures. Those measures, such as the administrative reform to cut down the number of civil servants and to institutionalise the selection of political elites, localisation of government power, promotion of the rule of law and institutionalisation of political rights, have been gradually changing the political system in China and pushing it towards democracy.

What role the Internet plays in shaping the political future of China in such a complex context is the central topic of the thesis. On the one hand, the Chinese government has realised the importance of the Internet to China’s economic growth. Since the reform, economic growth has become the cornerstone of the Chinese government’s legitimacy. The Internet is important to economic development as a source of information, a platform for communication and trade, and an industry itself. The last two decades have seen explosive growth of the Internet in China in terms of content, infrastructure and users, which has contributed much to the economic growth and government revenue. The Internet in China, as a network of business networks, has ‘adapted more rapidly than other areas of the world to the new technologies and to the new forms of global competition’ (Castells, 1996, p.173). The Chinese government has been playing an active role in promoting the development of the Internet.

At the same time, the Chinese government’s strategy to control the so-called ‘negative’ political influence of the Internet seems to work, at least in the short term. The government’s cyber strategy works in two ways. One is to eliminate or block the undesirable content by regulation, technology, and control of infrastructure. The other is to generate and lead content favourable to the government through projects like the Government Online Projects and by online versions of traditional mass media controlled by the government. The high growth rate of the Internet as a technology and an economy, juxtaposed with the continuing power of the Communist Party of China (CPC), calls into question many existing conceptions of technology-society relations formulated in the context of liberal democracies of late capitalism.

Moreover the rapid development of the Internet has brought changes that may lead to long-term evolution in China. In the process of democratisation in China in theory, the Internet works as a catalyst to democratic changes. It promotes the development of the public sphere and civil society in China, and provides new channels for political participation.

Why were university students in mainland China chosen as the population for the research? Because university students are technologically savvy, in the midst of an important period of growth that will impact the rest of their lives, and a key part of China's future. Another important attribute is that university students have played a leading role in protests and social movements in the history of modern China. Well-known examples include the May Fourth Movement during the period from 1915 to 1921 and the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989.

The research uses a social constructivist approach, one that also includes the researcher’s own reflections and perspectives on democracy and democratisation. The researcher’s background, experience and views of democracy and the future of mainland China have undoubtedly influenced the whole process of the research. The reflections of the researcher will therefore be added to the appendix for readers to better understand the researcher’s theoretical orientation and reflexivity.

## 1.4 Limitations of existing literature

The exponential growth of the Internet in China has generated debate, on whether or not the Internet will democratise China. The question itself, in the author’s opinion, is problematic in two ways. For one thing, it is philosophically biased by the preference for liberal democracy or the ideology of Western countries[[4]](#footnote-4), especially that of the United States, in most cases (e.g. Lagervist, 2006; Tai, 2006; Morozov, 2011). It presumes that democracy, liberal democracy in particular, is good or desirable for China or Chinese people and good for the whole world. It denies the possibilities of emergence and development of alternative forms of democracy or government in different contexts. There is never a want of alternative theories or experiments (Beetham, 1992; Chomsky, 2013). For another, it is methodologically Internet-centric and decontextualises the effect of the Internet from the time and the space it happens (Morozov, 2011). From an historical perspective, democratisation is a long evolutionary process in which preconditions – though different in different societies – emerge and develop to a turning point where a democracy is finally established. A democracy is unstable or the rule of people cannot be guaranteed when certain conditions are absent or immature. The examination of the role that the Internet plays in democratisation in China is far from sufficient to answer the question of whether China is going to be democratised in the sense that democratisation is a complicated process that requires a variety of favourable conditions to be successful. The existence of advanced and uncensored media is just one of those. Any technology on its own, including communication technology, is not a necessary, nor a sufficient, condition for democracy.

Different technologies can be used as tools or vehicles. Given the right circumstances, they may amplify and facilitate positive causes as well as negative ones. Accordingly, the Internet, as a technology, is not in and of itself a cause, but a medium for social and political change (Jiang & Xu, 2009). Therefore, the author argues it is more advisable to ask how the Internet is used and what that indicates in the context of China, instead of asking whether or not it will democratise China.

Efforts have been made to explore the democratic potential of the Internet and a notable amount of literature has been produced. Some believe that the Internet does not automatically bring about democracy and the realisation of its political potential depends on various factors including the polity, government control, economic development, etc. (Hughes, 2002; Kalathil, 2003; Abbott, 2001). Moreover, they argue that the Internet has not been making dramatic political changes, at least in the short term. According to them, three factors contribute to the maintenance of the *status quo*.

The first is the control of the party-state. It has done, and is doing, much more than censorship to secure its control over the new medium and its users. China operates the most extensive, technologically sophisticated, and broad-reaching system of thought control which is a combination of censorship, agenda-setting, severe punishment by law and personnel regulations of the units (the state or collective employers at different levels), the control of important resources, the education system, rituals and regular social gatherings. As King, Pan and Roberts (2013) put it, ‘the size and sophistication of the Chinese government’s program to selectively censor the expressed views of the Chinese people is unprecedented in recorded world history’ (p.326). Proving unsuccessful in fostering communist belief, this system is greatly successful in making people believe in nothing but material pursuit, generating nationalism and xenophobia and preventing critical thinking and discussion on alternative social or political systems.

In his study, Hughes (2002) pointed out that ‘the political and cultural contexts’ and ‘the nature of the technology itself’ are equally important in determining the impact of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies). Taking China as a case study, he argued that the impact of the globalisation of ICTs tended to favour regimes rather than their people. According to him, the globalisation of ICTs inclines to ‘reflect attempts to manipulate architecture and the collection and processing of data for the causes of strengthening the legitimacy and security of regimes, rather than the promotion of liberal democratic transformation’ (Hughes, 2002, p.221).

Kalathil (2003) studied the substantial impact of domestic and foreign Internet companies on business sectors and the political environment in China. Due to the fact that the state still controls ‘the fortunes of all those working in the Internet sector’, the changes Internet companies have been trying to make ‘appear to be taking place within an overall framework for media sector development set out by the central government’ (p.489). Benney (2014) observes that to seek maximised profits, ISPs (Internet Service Providers) in China choose to collaborate, not just comply, with the government. Not only do they control the flow of information as required by the government, they also choose to develop their products and services in a way that ‘maximises the cacophonous spectacle of entertainment and minimises reasoned discussion and debate’ in term of ‘design, organization, styles of language’ (Benney, 2014, pp.169-170). Thus ‘the risk of activism, controversial use, and network formation’ can be reduced (p.169). Those that choose not to comply, like Google, are driven out of the market. Such collaboration between Internet companies and the government is not unique to China. Twitter and Facebook are both ‘friends with the U.S. State Department’ and Twitter complied with the U.S. State Department to reschedule its maintenance during the 2009 protests in Iran (Morozov, 2011). Therefore, it is unfounded to expect that ‘their actions – or even their mere presence – will quickly lead to a more liberal political environment’ (Kalathil, 2003, p.499).

In addition, Internet users are hesitant to promote radical changes. Although a variety of different groups of Chinese Internet users can be identified, they share some common characteristics. The average user is young (84.4% under forty), and highly educated (more than 66.1% have a senior high school degree or higher qualification and many of those with lower degrees are students), belongs to the new urban middle class (Damm, 2007) or their children, and has benefited more than any other segment of the Chinese population from the economic, and to some extent, political reforms of the late 1990s and the new millennium. There would need to be a much more profound and acute offline crisis for this group of people to find it worth risking the online and offline freedoms they have gained in exchange for the very uncertain gamble that they might be able to gain even more (MacKinnon, 2008). Abbott (2001) argued that the political potential of the Internet to provide a new medium for dissent and opposition was offset by the existence of a marked ‘digital divide’ and ‘growing commercialization’. Lastly, Chinese traditional culture which has been chosen and shaped by the ruling class to cultivate loyal subjects instead of liberal citizens has lasted for thousands of years and is deeply rooted in Chinese society to pattern people’s thoughts and behaviour. A long history of an authoritarian regime leaves no breeding ground for even the philosophy of democracy to grow. People in such a regime would not know the alternative to tyranny even given the right to choose.

In general, there are some scholars who acknowledge the potential, or the impact, of the Internet based on its features, while they argue simultaneously that the realisation of the potential of the Internet, or the direction of the impact, is dependent on the context in which the Internet is embedded. With regards to the situation in China, they draw a negative conclusion about the democratising power of the Internet. Morozov (2011) even argues that the Internet ‘often strengthened rather than undermined the authoritarian rule’ (p.14).

At the same time, there are some other scholars (eg. Taubman, 1998; Zheng, 2005; Benkler, 2006; Yang, 2006; Yang, 2009) who believe that the Internet is promoting democracy, or democratising China despite the efforts of the government to control it. They attribute the realisation of the Internet’s democratic potential to its technological characteristics, its rapid development and its interplay with the democratic changes that have been emerging and developing in China. Benkler (2006) observes that

‘the basic technologies of information processing, storage, and communication have made nonproprietary models more attractive and effective than was ever before possible. Ubiquitous low-cost processors, storage media, and networked connectivity have made it practically feasible for individuals, alone and in cooperation with others, to create and exchange information, knowledge, and culture in patterns of social reciprocity, redistribution, and sharing, rather than proprietary, market-based production. The basic material capital requirements of information production are now in the hands of a billion people around the globe who are connected to each other more or less seamlessly. These material conditions have given individuals a new practical freedom of action’ (p.480).

Taubman (1998) argued that a number of key features of the Internet, including ‘the scope of and ease in obtaining information on the web, the communication capabilities available to users, and the decentralized nature’ (p.256), could undermine the regimes of undemocratic societies. Regimes like the CPC (the Communist Party of China) have gone to great lengths in order to keep the ‘negative consequences’ of the Internet under control, the Internet nonetheless tends to diminish their control over the ‘ideational and organizational character of domestic affairs’. Similarly, Hachigian (2001) believed in the power of the Internet to shift the ‘control over information’ from the state to the citizens. She argued that the Internet provided a space of free communication, though limited, despite the CPC’s regulations to ‘limit network content and use’. She furthermore asserted that ‘if a future economic or political crisis spurs a challenge to party rule, this shift in information control may decide the outcome’ (Hachigian, 2001, pp.129-133).

Yang (2009) believed that civic activity offline and online would, in due course, bring about China’s long revolution. Zheng (2005) also pointed out in his study, that democratisation might be possible as a result of the continuous effects of the Internet with the expansion of Internet use and development, because the Internet has promoted incremental political liberalisation. Seemingly, in examining the practice and impact of e-government in China, Zhang (2002) made an assumption that e-government had the possibility to accelerate the process of ‘peaceful evolution’ because it would, in the long run, inevitably lead to a breakthrough in the political system and in ways of thinking and behaving.

Yang (2006) concluded in his study of the Internet and civil society in China that the two energised each other. He argued that the co-evolutionary process of the Internet and civil society in China made political control more difficult as the government would face the joint challenge of technological and social forces. This ‘may have long-term consequences for democratic struggle in China’ (Yang, 2006, p.314). Although MacKinnon (2007) admitted that the Chinese government has ‘largely been successful in preventing a democracy infestation, especially in the short term’ (p.44), she also said that the answer could well be ‘yes’ to the question, if this new generation who have grown up using blogs and other forms of online participatory media will be much more ready for reasoned self-governance than the current generation. In general, these scholars agree that the Internet may democratise China, but it is an evolutionary process.

Whatever arguments they hold or what conclusions they arrive at, English language literature on the influence of the Internet in China demonstrates a strong interest in government control, and censorship in particular ([Taubman, 1998](#_ENREF_80); Qiu, 1999/2000; Boas & Kalathil, 2001; [Hachigian, 2001](#_ENREF_38); Harwit & Clark, 2001; Tsui L., 2001; Walton, 2001; [Edelman, 2003](#_ENREF_24); [Hughes and Wacker, 2003](#_ENREF_43); Kalathil, 2003; [BOAS, 2004](#_ENREF_8); Gorman, 2005; [Fry, 2006](#_ENREF_26); Crandall, et al., 2007; Dann & Haddow, 2007; MacKinnon, 2007; 2009; [Weber and Jia, 2007](#_ENREF_87); [Palfrey, 2008](#_ENREF_65)). This overemphasises the power of the regime and leaves the role played by society and common individuals much less-thoroughly studied. It should be acknowledged that individuals also play an important role in shaping the development of the Internet in China. Moreover, the transition of people to being literate, educated, informed, critical-minded and connected citizens is a key factor contributing to the emergence, consolidation and growth of democracy. The influence of the Internet on individual users is not universal. It depends largely on the pattern of how an individual uses the Internet. Moreover, with the dramatic increase in the number of Internet users in China, the Internet users are now much more representative of the whole population. The change may shift the conclusions resulting from previous research on Chinese Internet users. Studying the political impact of the Internet in terms of its users, thus, serves to construct a fuller picture of what the Internet has been doing in China.

Another important gap in the existing literature in the study of Internet use is the lack of proper methods. Internet use is simplified by measuring access to the Internet or recorded online hours, which overlooks the details and differences of Internet use of individuals. Consequently this leads to unreliable results when the correlation of Internet use and other variables is studied.

## 1.5 The structure of the thesis

The thesis consists of seven chapters with the Introduction constituting Chapter 1. The second chapter of the thesis forms the literature review which provides both a historical and theoretical overview of the major works relevant to this thesis and contextualises the research topic. Chapter 2 is composed of four sections. The first section theoretically reflects on the important contributing elements in the democratisation process including citizens of a democracy, an open and accountable political culture, free markets with varying degrees of internal regulation, economic growth, civil society, the public sphere, political participation, and political efficacy. With the theoretical framework provided in the first section, the second section explores China’s political tradition and the role that historical factors have in shaping contemporary political culture. The third section examines debates about the transition process in contemporary China since 1978. The final section of the chapter details the literature concerning the development and impact that the Internet has had on China.

Chapter 3 presents the overall epistemological approach and research design of the thesis along with a justification of the research methods and tools. It consists of four sections. The chapter commences with a presentation of the overall epistemological approach and research design. As an exploratory effort to interpret the influence of the Internet in the transition process in China from university students’ understanding of their Internet use, the research takes a grounded theory approach informed by realism ontologically and constructivism epistemologically. University students are chosen as the population, because they are a key part of China's future, in the midst of an important period of growth that will impact the rest of their lives, and more technologically savvy. University students have played a leading role in protests and social movements in the history of modern China. Data are collected by concrete techniques of sampling, six in-depth interviews, one focus group, online search and analysis of reported websites and web content, digital auto-ethnography, and literature review. Finally, data analysis goes through four phrases of coding, namely open coding, focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding as required by the grounded theory approach and NVivo 10 is used for analysis.

Chapters 4 and 5 present the substantive findings of the study including details of the participants’ use of the Internet and their understandings of five relevant issues. Of significance here is a detailed theoretical framing of the research and the categories of ‘Internet use’. Chapter 4 explores the lifeworld of the participants’ Internet use and examines previous debates about the impact of certain Internet applications. It commences with a general description of their Internet use habits and online activities and follows with a detailed demonstration of participants’ every online activity. In each section, the researcher briefly introduces the Internet application in China, reviews previous literature on the impact of the Internet application, and reflects on how the findings of the study contribute to a better understanding of the research topic. Rich data paint a vivid picture of participants’ online lifeworld. Their articulations and perceptions provide detailed and nuanced empirical evidence to better understand conclusions and assumptions of previous research and also throw light on new ways to understand the role of the Internet in the process of democratisation in China.

Chapter 5 focuses on how the participants articulate and perceive their online experience. It is composed of five sections each of which looks into a specific issue. The first section presents findings about the participants’ belief in how the Internet influences China, how they can have influence through the Internet, and how they are influenced. The study finds that only two participants who used tools to climb over the Great Firewall believed the power of the Internet in politics while most of the participants seldom thought about and never thought deeply about the topic. The participants believed that online public opinions and concerns, opinion leaders, and media exposure had a positive influence on social issues and governmental decision-making, while extreme comments did not have influence. However, they also believed that the influence was limited and did not have a profound influence on the political system, the people, or the Chinese culture due to government control, the disengaged public, the limited resources a small number of pioneers had, and the social environment. Two participants who shared social and political information and comments with intent to make a difference believed that they had a little influence through the Internet, while three others held disbelief in their influence. The participants believed that the Internet had a series of positive influences on their views, attitudes and behaviour including broadening their view, improving their networking abilities and so on.

Section two demonstrates that although most participants held a sceptical attitude toward user-generated content, they also believed that online comments were valuable and helped them to clarify their own thoughts and to see from different perspectives. Section three displays that the participants did not think that the social or political issues or problems exposed online affected their life, work, self-development, interests, or material gains. Section four shows that the participants did not think that Internet censorship was a major reason affecting their choice of reading online political content, but the influence of Internet censorship on online deliberation is evident. Their attitudes toward censorship are different: negative, neutral, complex, or unconcerned. The last section presents findings about the participants’ attitude toward government corruption. Two participants thought that government corruption was severe in China.

Chapter 6 provides the analysis and in doing so offers a nuanced interpretation of Internet use by the cohort of students. The chapter illustrates the complex nature of online activity by university students and the implications for political engagement and participation within this context. Chapter 6 consists of five sections. Political disengagement has been found common among the participants. This is not a new finding. The study just provides new individualised empirical evidence for the old conclusion that the Internet means play, not work or politics for the vast majority of Chinese (Marolt & Herold, 2014, p.24). It is innovative in two ways. Firstly, it contributes to a better understanding of the causes of online political disengagement from the perspective of university students. The causes include censorship, disbelief in relevance of social problems, belief in a shock therapy, and lack of civic organisations and activities. The participants did not see or think that the social problems or issues exposed online affected their life or development and thus were not motivated enough to care or make efforts to make a difference. The participants were also found to believe democratisation as a revolutionary overturn from the current system to a democratic government and comprehensive dismantling of the institutions of Communist Party rule. Therefore, they did not think they had a role to play or were willing to play a role in that picture in which the process is quite undesirable and the result uncertain and risky. In addition, there was a lack of organisations and activities actively approaching university students and providing channels or ways easily accessible for the university students to involve themselves in politics. Secondly, a close look at who communicates with the participants online and the participants’ understanding of how they are influenced by content from or about different cultures provides news angles from which to interpret the social and political implications of political disengagement and mass entertainment online. The participants’ greater exposure to the Internet, especially to various communicators other than the party-state online, than to the traditional media breaks the party-state’s hegemony over the distribution of information and ideologies through which a pro-authoritarianism political culture is cultivated and secured. Moreover, the author argues that participants’ Internet use creates conditions of ideational pluralism for them. However, whether entertainment is a way of control or a way to liberate is still debatable.

Section two reflects on how the participants thought that they were influenced by their Internet use within the theoretical framework of political efficacy and democratic citizenship. Firstly, the participants believed that they were better-equipped with sources and skills to be a better-informed citizen by the Internet. Secondly, one participant proposed that online exposure to conflicting views and alternative ideas fostered his tolerance of diversity and conflicts among different groups. Thirdly, using online stranger platforms (for definition, see Chapter 3, 3.6.2, category 28, Between acquaintances and strangers) for politics seems to increase participants’ internal political efficacy. Finally, viewing, sharing, and deliberation of social issues, exposure to sensitive topics and restricted on-and-off-line sharing and deliberation of sensitive topics, increases the participants external political efficacy, which in turn, encourages their participation online.

Section three challenges the assumption that a liberalised Internet will inevitably bring liberal democracy to an authoritarian regime by examining the participants’ experience and understanding of climbing over the Great Firewall. It is found that in a liberalised Internet a user does not necessarily acquire knowledge or information that substantially changes his/her views about a political system. It is also found that a liberalised Internet does not necessarily make a user more politically active than a controlled Internet does. Lack of motivation is the major reason that stops the participants from stepping onto the liberalised Internet instead of censorship. However, it is important to note that accessing the liberalised Internet through climbing over the Great Firewall is different from daily use of a liberalised Internet.

Section four demonstrates that civic talk went within and beyond the Internet despite censorship. Moreover, associations at civic or political level are found uncommon among the studied participants while associations at private level are extremely common. A number of Internet applications like online forums, communities, QQ groups and so on, are utilised to bring together people who share an interest. In online communities, forums, or groups, Internet users communicate, exchange information, and arrange activities for the benefits of their members, which casts an influence on the real world. Moreover, Internet users also use the Internet to organise activities and groups to serve their own purposes. This trend of Internet use, the author argues, marks a rise of civil society online.

Chapter 7 summarises the overall findings, highlights the contributions, identifies the scope and limitations of the research and looks into various possibilities for further research. The research collected qualitative data that provided rich details about individuals’ Internet use and their understandings through six in-depth interviews, one focus group, search and analysis of web content, and auto-ethnography. Moreover, the grounded theory approach helps to generate new understandings and ideas that provide imaginative explanations of the topic studied. As qualitative research relying mainly on self-reports of the participants, it is impossible to generalise the findings and conclusion to the population and the author must be cautious not to assume that what the participants reported is what they really did or thought, but what they tried to construct with the researcher and the group members. The research provokes more interesting questions than it solved. For example, how popular are the findings of the research among the population, or other groups of Internet users? What is the difference between what the participants reported and what they really did and why? To name but a few.

# Chapter 2: Literature review

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the theoretical framework of the thesis and the context in which the research topic is situated. It is composed of four sections. The first section provides an overview of democracy and democratisation, and reflects on the important contributing elements in the process of democratisation. These include citizens of a democracy, political efficacy, an open and accountable political culture, free markets with varying degrees of internal regulation, economic growth, civil society, public sphere, and political participation. With the theoretical frame work provided in the first section, the second section of the chapter explores China’s political tradition and the role that historical factors have in shaping contemporary political culture; and the third section examines debates about contemporary China and the process of reform and democratisation. The final section of the chapter details the literature concerning the development and impact that the Internet has had on China. This chapter provides a survey of the literature relating to democracy and democratisation. In doing so it has provided a theoretical context in which the study of democratisation in China can be further nuanced and elaborated. Moreover, the chapter has detailed research which has sought to reflect on the ‘impact’ of the Internet in Chinese society. Such research provides this researcher with an important opportunity to add detail and nuance in our understanding of the role of the Internet in the process of democratisation in China.

## 2.2 Democracy and democratisation

The research is situated within a bigger debate on whether or not the Internet is going to democratise mainland China. This part of the literature review provides the theoretical framework so as to understand the importance that political tradition has had in the political, economic, cultural and social changes that have occurred in the last three decades in mainland China. Such literature enables a contextualisation of the data which has enabled the researcher to critically reflect on the participants’ articulations and perceptions of their Internet use. The reform era since 1978 is chosen as the social context because the neoliberalism route the economic reform took has transformed Chinese society dramatically and provokes heated debate about where the route will lead China politically.

To enable a critical reflection on the transitional process in China since 1978, both democracy and democratisation are defined in two ways (see Chapter 1, 1.2, Objective 4). Conceptually, democracy is defined as a mode of decision-making about collectively binding rules and policies over which the people exercise control. Democratisation is defined as a process in which a society or a nation moves from the most undemocratic arrangement to the most democratic one. In practice, democracy refers to liberal democracy. Democratisation refers to the process by which a society or a nation transfers from a non-democratic situation to a liberal democracy. Liberal democracy is chosen for two reasons. For one thing, it is now the predominant political system and the predominant form of democracy in the world. For another, ‘to democratise China’ means ‘to bring liberal democracy to China’ for most scholars and my participants.

A number of scholars (eg. Hayek, 1944; [Lipset, 1959](#_ENREF_2)；Pennock, 1979; [Huntington, 1984](#_ENREF_2); [Berger, 1986](#_ENREF_1); Hu, 1988; Rawls, 1973; Duch, 1993; [Hellivell, 1994](#_ENREF_1); [Barro, 1996](#_ENREF_1); He, 1996; Leftwich, 1996; Potter, 1997; Dahl, 1998; [Barro, 1999](#_ENREF_1); and Young, 1999) believe that certain conditions are favourable or contribute to the emergence or consolidation of liberal democracy and they are developed over a significant period of time. Those conditions include the willingness and capacity of the citizens to engage themselves in politics, a pro-democratic political culture, a free market, economic growth, civil society, a public sphere, political participation, and freedom of the mass media. Absence of such prerequisites leads to failure in democratic arrangements. The history of political institutions of many democratic states today reveals the ‘fragility and vulnerability of democratic arrangements’ ([Held, 2006](#_ENREF_1), p.1). The following seven sections will contain a critical reflection on those factors regarding their relation to democracy, based on which the situation in mainland China will be examined.

### 2.2.1 Democratisation and favourable conditions

There is no consensus on when and where the first democracy came into being, as there is no consensus on the concept of democracy and democratisation. It is, however, commonly agreed that the ancient Greeks took on the earliest form of democracy. After that, there followed a long period of absence of democracy as a form of government ‘till the first long wave of democratisation during the 19th century identified by Huntington (1991). In this study, democracy as a form of government is emphasised, because ‘political systems with democratic characteristics long existed in many areas of the world at tribal or village level’ (Huntington, 1991, p.13), and it is impossible to take into consideration those political systems in this study.

In his study, including the first wave mentioned above, Huntington (1991) identified three waves of democratisation. During each wave, a remarkable number of countries took democracy as the form of their governments. For example the third wave started from the early 1970s. Since then the number of democracies has risen steadily and it more than doubled in the following two decades (Haerpfer, 2009). More than half of the world’s population now lives under democracy, or ‘the rule of popularly elected governments’ (Taubman, 1998, p.255). Taubman (1998) regarded ‘the global erosion of nondemocratic rule’ as ‘one of the striking trends of the late 20th century’ (p. 255). Nonetheless, each wave was accompanied by a reverse wave afterwards which has ‘eliminated some of the transitions to democracy of the previous democratisation wave’ (Huntington, 1991). Dahl (1998) pointed out that ‘the twentieth century was a time of frequent democracies failure’ during which more than seventy democracies ‘collapsed and gave way to an authoritarian regime’ (p.145).

The history of democracy demonstrates the ‘fragility and vulnerability of democratic arrangements’. It also prompts the following questions: Why did democracy take form in ancient Athens? Why had there been a long absence of democracy as a form of government before the first wave? Why do a notable number of democracies emerge, consolidate and advance while many countries remain undemocratic and many democracies collapse? Scholars try to answer these questions from different perspectives and they discern a number of factors as favourable conditions for the emergence and consolidation of democracy. The most commonly agreed conditions are pro-democracy political culture, free markets, economic growth, strong civil society (Dahl, 1998; Diamond, 1992; Grugel, 2002; Hadenius, 1992; Huntington, 1984; Huntington, 1991; Potter, 1997) and mass media for modern democracy (James, 2002; 2008). These factors are correlated to each other in one way or another. There are two points that are important to be noted before proceeding to discuss these factors. For one thing, every factor is only one potential component of the political impetus towards the emergence and consolidation of democracy, but none of these factors alone is either necessary or sufficient. For another, the success of every democracy is unique and it is a combination of many factors.

### 2.2.2 Democracy and its people

***Who rules?***

The least disputed aspect of democracy is who rules. It is commonly agreed that it is the people who rule in a democracy (Arblaster, 2002; Schumpeter, 1943; Bastian and Luckham, 2003; Grugel, 2002). However, it is much disputed as to who can be classified as the people, or citizens who have the right to vote and to be elected. Inclusivity is always a historical and contextual matter. Women were excluded from notions of citizenship from the world’s first democracy in ancient Athens through to the mid-1800s (Paxton, 2009, p.150). ‘All pre-industrial democracies were nascent democracies that restricted entitlements to the propertied classes’ (Haerpfer, 2009, p.75). It was not until the last century that women have had the right to vote almost everywhere. Even in democracies where a universal suffrage is achieved, certain groups are still underrepresented in practice.

***How can the rule of people be guaranteed?***

In a narrow view, people rule by election of the government and voting on public issues. However, the mere existence of elections and the right to vote and be elected does not necessarily guarantee the rule of people. Citizens’ participation in the political process is the key to realising their power. Opinions are divided as to the question of whether there are requirements for citizens to make participation meaningful and to fulfil their democratic obligations, between scholars with an elitist view and scholars with a pluralist view. The former believe that mal-informed or irrational participation is disastrous. ‘Democracies required democratic citizens, whose specific knowledge, competences, and character would not be as well suited to nondemocratic politics’ (Galston, 2001, p.217). Schumpeter (1976) identifies requirements for citizens to fulfil their democratic rights and to perform their obligations. He (Schumpeter, 1976, p.250) argues that every member should be ‘conscious of the goal (the common good), know his or her mind, discern what is good and what is bad, and take part actively and responsibly’. His requirements consist of three parts: an individual’s 1) ability, 2) willingness to perform his or her political rights as well as obligations and 3) his or her political performance.

An individual needs to be rational, which means to consider the long-term consequences and interests of others as well as the short-term consequences and their own interests, or democracy will result in the autocracy of the majority to the minority, as warned against by Tocqueville and Bradley (1945); current development at the cost of the future; or chaos. Both Plato (Plato and Waterfield, 1998) and Aristotle, et al. (1981) criticised the inability of the nonelites to rule and condemned democracy as ‘the rule by the mob’. Lippmann (1922) and Schumpeter (1943) also argued against public involvement in the discussion of policy issues. Therefore, the right to equal education, the right to free expression (Dahl, 1989) and free gathering, the freedom of the media, and equal accessibility to the media should be institutionally guaranteed in order to produce qualified citizens for ideal democracy. However, the latter believe that an elitist view and arguments supporting the above requirements are anti-democratic. Democracy regards every individual as equal. Requiring citizens to be rational, well-informed, and so on excludes those who are not and advantages the privileged (see Chapter 2, 2.2.5).

Findings of the research help to answer the question from the perspective of both sides. On the one hand, they provide evidence to understand whether or not the Internet provides different individuals with equal opportunities of political participation. Does their course of study, especially social science and science make a difference, and does learning English affect the participants’ online political participation? On which side do the participants stand? On the other hand, they also throw light on how different patterns of Internet use exert impact on the participants’ views and abilities, that the elitism-oriented scholars deem essential for qualified democratic citizens.

***Political efficacy***

For a citizen to take part actively demands his or her willingness to engage in public issues. Political participation involves information searching, public debating, reasoning, voting, and other activities which are time-and-energy-consuming. That partly explains why on most occasions the rights fall into the hands of the professional politicians and the rich who have enough leisure time for this. The general well-being of citizens, thus, is crucial to safeguard democracy as it provides leisure time and energy for them to participate (Ashford, 2010) and generates the values and attitudes that treasure political and civil engagement.

Political efficacy concerns individuals’ feelings about, and beliefs in, themselves and in the political system that affect their willingness to perform their political rights as well as obligations. Political efficacy pertains to a citizen’s belief in affecting the political system (Williams, 2001). Campbell, et al. (1954) conceptualised political efficacy as the ‘feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process, namely, that it is worthwhile to perform one’s civic duties’ (p.187). Political efficacy is split into two parts: internal and external. Internal political efficacy concerns personal beliefs regarding the ability to achieve desired results in the political domain through personal engagement and an efficient use of one’s own capacities and resources. External political efficacy concerns people’s beliefs that the political system is amenable to change through individual and collective influence. Whereas internal efficacy mostly concerns the degree of influence that people perceive themselves to be able to exert, due to their own capacities, external efficacy concerns the degree of influence people perceive themselves to be able to exert, due to the actual functioning of the political system (Caprara, et al., 2009). Political efficacy plays an important role in promoting both conventional and non-conventional forms of political participation (Caprara, et al., 2009; Gerodimos, 2010).

### 2.2.3 Political culture

The political culture is accepted by some scholars as an important factor that affects the democratic arrangements of a country, and it also is the central concern of Chinese people’s doubt about their own capacity for democracy ([Nathan, 1990](#_ENREF_9)). Political culture refers to the set of attitudes, beliefs, and sentiments that give order and meaning to a political process and provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behaviour in a political system (Pye, 1990). A political culture is the product of both the collective history of a political system and the life histories of the members of that system, and thus it is rooted equally in public events and private experiences ([He, 1996](#_ENREF_4)).

[Huntington (1984](#_ENREF_2), p.209) argued that the prevalence of some values and beliefs was more conducive to the emergence of democracy than others. Potter (1997) also held the belief that ‘democratisation is more likely to occur in countries where political culture’ is ‘pro-democratic’. A political culture that highly values hierarchical relationships and extreme deference to authority, greatly stresses the need to acquire power, and underemphasises the need to accommodate others was believed by [Huntington (1984](#_ENREF_2), p.209) to be more likely to have authoritarian or totalitarian rule. On the contrary, a political culture in which there is a high degree of mutual trust among members, tolerance for diversity and conflict among groups and recognition of the legitimacy of compromise was believed to be more favourable to democracy. Drawing on the works of Huntington (1984, p.209), Hu Ping (1988, pp.188-195), Pennock (1979, pp.236-259) and Rawls (1973, p.17, p.21), [He (1996](#_ENREF_1), p.157) asserted that democracy required widespread acceptance of such values as dignity, autonomy, respect for persons, belief in individual rights and commitment to democratic procedures. It also requires virtues such as reasonableness and a sense of fairness, a spirit of compromise, a readiness to meet others half way, mutual trust among members of the society, and willingness to tolerate diversity and conflict among groups. ‘Democratic beliefs and political culture’ is suggested by Dahl (1998, p.147) as one of the five conditions that are favourable to the stability of democracy. He argued that weak presence or entire absence of those conditions lead to a low likelihood of the existence of democracy or a precarious democracy.

### 2.2.4 Free markets, capitalism, and economic growth

A free market, the opposite of a controlled (or command) market, is a market in which economic decisions and the pricing of goods and services are guided solely by the laws of supply and demand and economic intervention and regulation by the state is limited to tax collection and enforcement of private ownership and contracts. Free markets as a form of economy is sometimes used interchangeably with ‘capitalism’ and ‘market economy’, but on most occasions it is regarded as an important feature or component of capitalism or a market economy. Capitalism is a political-economic system characterised by ‘1) market competition among profit-driven firms; 2) wage-based employment under hierarchical control within these firms; and 3) limited government authority over these firms’ activities’ (Adler, 2013, p.207).

The link between democracy and the free market or capitalism is emphasised by a rich philosophical literature. Schumpeter (1942) believes that capitalism and democracy were mutually causal historically and mutually supportive parts of a rising modern civilization. Friedman (1982) observes that a competitive, free market, private enterprise, capitalist system is an essential condition for economic freedom and thus political freedom which is indispensable to democracy. Hayek (1944) and Dahl (1989) have found a strong correlation between democracy and free markets, at least at the institutional level. Robert A. Dahl (1990; 1998), the leading American democratic theorist, emphasises that though certainly not sufficient, market-oriented economies are necessary (in the logical sense) to democratic institutions in the new edition of his book, *After the Revolution? Authority in a Good Society*. [Berger (1986](#_ENREF_1)) expresses the same opinion. He argues that a high degree of opening up to market forces is a necessary condition for democracy under modern conditions. History supports the correlation between democracy and free markets. Duch (1993, p.590) points out that ‘most countries experienced democratisation after the introduction of free-market institutions’ (e.g. the recognition of certain basic property rights, and a free market pricing system). Moreover, all democratic societies have had free market economies ([Duch, 1993](#_ENREF_1), p.594). [Lindblom (1977](#_ENREF_4), p.116) strongly believes that ‘democracy has been unable to exist except when coupled with the market’. Free markets also help to consolidate democracy. [Kurtz (2004](#_ENREF_4)) examined the relationship between free markets and democracy in the context of Chile and Mexico and found that the implementation of free market economic reforms in these two countries had helped to consolidate their democratic politics.

Economic growth is usually measured by the increase of per capita gross domestic product (GDP) or other measures of aggregate income, typically reported as the annual rate of change in real GDP. Since economic growth has a strong positive correlation with people’s living standards, and the level and rate of literacy and education and the urbanisation rate in a society, it is also measured by these indicators in some studies. Among the three theories of democratisation, i.e., modernisation theory; historical sociology (sometimes called structuralism); and transition theory (also known as agency theory), categorised by Grugel (2002), modernisation associates economic growth in a causal relationship with democratisation. Leftwich (1996) argues that economic development, whether in a democratic political setting or not, will inevitably produce democracy in the long term.

In fact, there is no evidence that democracy is better than other forms of governance in boosting economic development, but empirical data strongly supports the notion that countries at higher income levels are more likely to be democracies ([Lipset, 1959](#_ENREF_2); [Hellivell, 1994](#_ENREF_1); [Barro, 1996](#_ENREF_1); [Barro, 1999](#_ENREF_1)). [Hellivell (1994](#_ENREF_1)) analysed the data of 98 countries from 1976 to 1985 and the results showed that 42% of the variance among countries in the freedom index was explained by variations in per capita incomes. That is to say, the standard of living, measured by per capita incomes, explained 42% of the variance of the political freedom among the countries. [Barro (1996](#_ENREF_1), p.1) conducted a panel study of about 100 countries from 1960 to 1990 and he concluded that ‘improvement in the standard of living – measured by GDP, health status, and education – substantially raised the probability the political freedoms would grow’. He argued that these results allowed for predictions of democratic development in countries over time. Three year later, findings of his other panel study of over 100 countries from 1960 to 1995 confirmed and developed his conclusions. It was found that ‘increases in various measures of the standard of living’ forecasted ‘a gradual rise in democracy’, ‘as measured by a subjective indicator of electoral rights’ ([Barro, 1999](#_ENREF_1)). [Friedman (2005](#_ENREF_1)) believed that economic growth benefited a society morally in that consistent growth encouraged political and social reform, allowed for the possibility of economic mobility and fairness, and provided the substance for democracy. Moreover, Ashford (2010) argues that people need time and energy to engage in political participation. Economic well-being eases people’s burden of earning a living and thus provides time and energy for political participation.

In addition, the level and rate of education and literacy and the urbanisation rate, as indicators of economic growth, have been found to be positively related to democracy. As early as 1959, [Lipset (1959](#_ENREF_2)) introduced the rate and the level of literacy and education of people as an intervening factor to explain the mechanism of how economic development promoted democracy. There is no doubt that a better-developed economy results in a higher rate and level of literacy and education. He points out that the available comparative data support the linkage between the chances for democracy and education and the literacy rate in a country. He emphasises increased education as one of the key elements for the emergence and development of democracy. Hadenius (1992) and Diamond (1992) support the notion that there are strong correlations between high literacy rates and democracy. Grugel’s study (2002) also supports a strong statistical association between a population’s level of education and its commitment to democracy. Modernisation theory identifies education as one of the signposts for an emerging democratic order. [Hellivell (1994](#_ENREF_1), p.244) suggests that increasing levels of education are likely to ‘increase citizen demands for many things, including the range of political and civil freedoms that characterize democratic systems’. At the same time, Lipset’s [comparative study (1959](#_ENREF_2)) also found that the degree of urbanisation was related to the existence of democracy.

However, claims of market liberalism only represent one philosophical perspective to address the relationship between a free market and democracy. There has never been a want of competing perspectives. The liberal notions that a free market gives citizens economic freedom and fair competition in a free market secures equal engagement of citizens in the economic arena is under heavy attack from socialism, communism, and other democratic theories (Beetham, 1992; Harvey, 2007; Chomsky, 2013). They argue that a free market favours economic elites including the propertied class and professional managers, and it disadvantages market losers including the labour and the poor. In this sense, it amplifies the economic and social inequality and thus undermines democracy. Market liberalism also justifies the contribution of a free market to democracy by arguing that a free market promotes economic growth. It thus improves the material well-being of citizens which makes possible the conditions for democracy such as more time for political participation and a higher capacity for political performance, enabled by education. The argument is also problematic according to social democrats. They believe that economic development does not justify the increasing disparity between the rich and the poor brought about by a free market (Harvey, 2007; Chomsky, 2013). Moreover, the self-paralysing feature of free markets has produced economic regressions and sequential political and social crises in the history of liberal democracies (Keane, 1992; Harvey, 2007).

The author admits that the criticism of free markets or capitalism is genuine and plausible. However, the author argues that free markets have made democracies practicable in human history so far till now while other experiments of economic arrangements all failed to provide an alternative when democracy is considered as a reality instead of an ideal or a concept. The introduction of a market mechanism empowers the existing economic elites and yields new economic elites who counterbalance the political elites. The separation of political power and economic power enables mutual scrutiny of each other and raises the accountability of both sides. It is true that democracies with free markets favour the propertied even when universal suffrage is realised. The author asserts that the democratic potential of a free market or capitalism does not lie in its role of including the non-propertied citizens in the ruling class or to advantage them, but in the consequence that it turns more non-propertied citizens into propertied ones, and thus expands inclusivity through its ability to enhance productiveness, flexibility and efficiency (Keane, 1992). In such a sense, it has never changed the criteria for who are qualified people to rule in a democracy - that is the ownership of property. But it makes more individuals qualified as ‘the people’ who rule. The last but equally important point is that a market mechanism or capitalism provides economic incentives for the members of different groups to tolerate commercially irrelevant differences of others, which is grounds for a pluralistic society favourable for a democracy.

### 2.2.5 Strong civil society and public sphere

***Civil society***

The concept of civil society evolved in the 19th century. Civil society is defined as ‘autonomous organisation’ and ‘autonomous public discourse’ by McCormick (1992), ‘an arena of independent associational activity’ by Perry and Fuller (1991, p.663), the space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks that fill their space by Walzer (1995), and ‘a society's style of culture with respect to individual participation in group life’ by Koscianski (2009). The definitions demonstrate two major features of civil society. On the one hand, whatever term they used, organisation, public, associational, or group, they agreed that civil society is social or of a group ([Koscianski, 2009](#_ENREF_6); [McCormick](#_ENREF_8) 1992; [Walzer, 1995](#_ENREF_13); [White, et al., 1996](#_ENREF_14); [Perry and Fuller, 1991](#_ENREF_11)). On the other hand, civil society is autonomous or independent ([Koscianski, 2009](#_ENREF_6); [McCormick](#_ENREF_8), 1992; [Walzer, 1995](#_ENREF_13); [White, et al., 1996](#_ENREF_14); [Perry and Fuller, 1991](#_ENREF_11)).

In a broad sense, civil society is free from coercion or force of state. It includes ‘all of social life outside the state’ (Young, 1999, p.143). State refers to ‘activities and institutions of legal regulations, enforcement backed by coercion, legislatively mandated coordination and public services, along with the managerial and technical apparatus necessary to carry out these functions effectively’ (Young, 1999, p.143). In a narrow sense, civil society is independent from both the state and economy (Cohen and Arato, 1992; Walzer, 1995; Nielsen, 1995; Habermas, 1996). By economy, they meant a capitalist economy or a market economy in which ‘economic activity is profit- and-market-oriented’ (Young, 1999, p.143). It is important to note that the well-off and the privileged as individuals can act in civil society too. However, civil society should be independent from the influence of the state and economy as an institution.

In this study, the author will take the three-sector perspective to see civil society as a means for individuals to collectively check and keep balance with political or economic power, or both. Therefore, civil society is defined as the space of associational activities relatively autonomous from both the state and economy.

Civil society is believed to have unique virtues in promoting democracy and justice (Young, 1999). The democratising potential of civil society is supported by its identified contribution to ‘bringing about the downfall of many authoritarian regimes in the Third World in the third wave of democratisation’, ‘in contexts as diverse as those of South Korea and Zambia’ ([White, et al., 1996](#_ENREF_13), p.1). Putman (1993) argued that a rich associational life strengthened democratic institutions and culture. A ‘free and lively’ civil society is one of the four characteristics identified by [Linz and Stepan (1996](#_ENREF_4); 1998) as necessary for successful democratic transition. Young (1999) suggested that civil society promoted democracy and justice in two ways. For one thing, it allows ‘self-organisation for the purposes of identity support, the invention of new practices, and the provision of some goods and services’ (p.141). For another, ‘public spheres thriving in civil society often limit state and economic power and make their exercise more accountable to citizens’ (p.141). Diamond (1994) identified ten democratic functions of civil society including limiting the state power and subjecting governments to public scrutiny, providing an arena for citizens to participate in voluntary associations to increase their democratic awareness, skills and so on. He also observed that civil society is just as important for restraining democratic governments as it is in opposing non-democratic governments, because ‘the first and most basic democratic function of civil society is to provide “the basis for the limitation of state power, hence for the control of the state by society, and hence for democratic political institutions as the most effective means of exercising that control”’ no matter whether the state is democratic or non-democratic (Diamond, 1994, p.7).

***Public sphere***

Like civil society, the conception of the public sphere continues to hold centre stage in debates and visions of democratic society. Most contemporary conceptualisations of the public sphere are based on the ideas expressed in Jürgen Habermas’ book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere – An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Zizi Papacharissi (2002, p.11) summarises Habermas’ version of the public sphere as

He saw the public sphere as a domain of our social life in which public opinion could be formed out of rational public debate. Ultimately, informed and logical discussion, Habermas argued, could lead to public agreement and decision making, thus representing the best of the democratic tradition (Papacharissi, 2002, p.11).

Habermas’ original ideal/historical model has been much studied, criticised and developed by scholars in different fields of social science and by Habermas himself. There are various versions of the public sphere. Nanz (2000) conceptualised the public sphere as ‘a plurality of publics with different perspectives’. At the root of the public sphere is a democratic vision of public space, seeing it as the creation of procedures whereby those affected by general social norms and collective political decisions can have a say in their formulation, stipulation and adoption (Benhabib, 1992). In the public sphere, members of society exchange ideas, discuss matters of common interest, and consequently form various collective identities and public opinion. Through such processes of public discourse, scrutiny, and opinion forming, members of society can exert influence on decisions taken in politics and the economic market. Thus, the public sphere is seen as a medium of democratic decision making. Its deliberative nature is a source of democratic legitimacy (Joss, 2002). Pinter (2004) draws from the studies of Habermas, Hardt, Hohendahl, Keane, Mah and Peters and defines the public sphere as a realm of free and intelligent communication about contested public concerns and uninhibited exchange of opinions about these concerns. Eriksen (2005, pp.341-2) argues that:

In its widest sense, the public sphere is the social room that is created when individuals discuss common concerns in front of an audience. The notion of a public sphere is internally linked to normative political theory as it is a medium for political justification – for putting the decision makers to account – as well as for political initiative, viz., the mobilizing of political support. It is the place where civil society is linked to the power structure of the state. The public sphere, then, not only enables autonomous opinion formation but also empowers the citizens to influence the decision makers. It is a precondition for redeeming the claim to self-government–that the citizens can govern themselves through politics and law (Eriksen, 2005, pp.341-2).

He takes the public sphere as a precondition for the realisation of popular sovereignty. While Dahlgren states that:

In schematic terms, a functioning public sphere is understood as a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates—ideally in an unfettered manner—and also the formation of political will (i.e., public opinion). These spaces, in which the mass media and now, more recently, the newer interactive media figure prominently, also serve to facilitate communicative links between citizens and the power holders of society (2005, p.148).

Different from each other in wording or details, they all agree that the public sphere 1) is the precondition of democracy, 2) permits the circulation of information, ideas, and debates, 3) influences the formulation, stipulation and adoption of general social norms and collective political decisions, and 4) works as a link between civil society and the power structure. Here the power structure is not situated in a state because globalisation has produced concepts such as a global public sphere and EU public sphere which go far beyond state borders. There is also controversy over issues such as access, freedom of speech, inclusivity and exclusivity, characteristics of participants, autonomy, and the themes, forms, and ends of discourse.

According to Habermas (1989; 1996), a public sphere has three institutional criteria in common: disregard of status, domain of common concern, and inclusivity. He puts great emphasis on ‘communicative rationality’ and thinks that the discourse ends with ‘public agreement and decision making’. Blumler and Coleman (2001) also accentuate ‘access for all’ to e-democracy. Gimmler (2001) argues that in the public sphere ‘that discourse is constituted by equality among participants, the complete disclosure of procedures, the temporary suspension of domination and structural power, and the creation of a situation in which themes for discussion can be freely chosen’. Dahlberg (2005), drawing upon Habermas’ theories of communicative action, discourse ethics, and deliberative democracy, specifies the conditions as ‘the thematization and reasoned critique of problematic validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role taking (combining impartiality and respectful listening), sincerity, formal inclusion, discursive equality, and autonomy from state and corporate interests’ (p112). A public sphere with the features of inclusivity, equality, communicative rationality, critical and sincere participants and autonomy from structural power and corporate interests as stated above, is labelled as an ideal model in this thesis.

Many studies evaluate the potential of the Internet to construct a new public sphere by those standards, and deny the possibility (Polat, 2005). As to inclusivity, ‘the Internet is not universally accessible by the public’ (Polat, 2005, p.449). Considering the situation in China, use of the Internet is mostly limited to people who are already better off in terms of both living conditions and having access to rational critical public debate. Therefore, the Internet is far from being an ideal public sphere because it is exclusive and elitist rather than inclusive or public (Papacharissi, 2002). Moreover, the online discourse lacks rationality and unity enabled by common concern (Papacharissi, 2002; Dahlberg, 2005; Polat, 2005). Instead, it is ‘too fragmented and decentralised to form a public sphere’ (Polat, 2005, p.449). Thirdly, status matters online. A case at point is microblogging space in China. It is dominated by better educated and more affluent urbanites and about 5% of microblogging users generated more than 80% of the original posts (Guo, et al., 2012; Fu & Chau, 2013). The 5% of microblogging users are mostly those who are the elites, stars, or celebrities of the society.

The ideal model, however, has been encountering much criticism. There are three major objections. First, a universal public sphere with inclusivity and equality can only exist theoretically as an ideal while, in reality, various constraints contribute to limited access. For example, Fraser (1992) points out that Habermas’ ideal model of the public sphere is not inclusive itself in that it excludes women and nonpropertied classes. The deeply entrenched hierarchies and routinised patterns of control that characterise the mass media, not to mention the overall complexity of social and political processes more generally, create a barrier that any genuinely discourse-based and critical public sphere cannot hope to penetrate (Gimmler, 2001). In addition, each communicative act serves to reveal inequalities in knowledge, education, access to information, social status, language skills, and the like (Gimmler, 2001). The second objection concentrates on the rationality of the discourse and requirements of its participants. Critics such as Lyotard raised the issue that anarchy, individuality, and disagreement, rather than rational accord, lead to true democratic emancipation (Papacharissi, 2002). Moreover, if it requires its participants to be critical, impartial and rational, it excludes those who are not, who are not able to be, or who are ignorant and unsophisticated (Dean, 2003). It is supposed to be a place where participants practice their deliberative skills and learn to be ideal citizens. Rationality should not be a requirement to participate in a public sphere, but a gift of participation. Finally, discussion on topics of common concern and the formation of public opinion marginalise some voices that do not agree or have specific concerns, for example the minority groups.

Facing the criticism, various recent accounts including Habermas’ own later model depict the public sphere not as one site, but as the interlocking of multiple networks and spaces (Couldry and Dreher, 2007). For example, Habermas (1996, cited in Erik, 2005, p.345) states that:

The public sphere is a common room in society, but it is a room that is presently divided into different assemblies, forums, arenas, scenes and meeting places where the citizens can gather. Today the public sphere is a highly complex network of various public spheres, which stretches across different levels, rooms, and scales (Habermas, 1996, cited in Erik, 2005, p.345).

Dean (2003) does not approve the attempt to make the notion of the public sphere applicable to the complex reality by conceptualising it as ‘a highly complex network of various public spheres’. She argues that the various public spheres should be one public sphere if they share the same norms: equality, transparency, inclusivity, rationality and orientation around issues of common concerns. On the contrary, they should not be called public spheres, but interest groups, ‘if they are exclusive, partial, oriented around specific concerns and interests’ (p.97) according to Habermas’ notion of the public sphere. She argues that the world is actually characterised by antagonisms. There are various forms of conflicts going in various spaces in the world (p.103). The public sphere’s orientation around common concerns and its goal to reach consensus, she maintains, legitimises ‘communicatively generated power’, or the decision-making process in a liberal democracy, but distracts people’s attention from the actual conflicts. In such a sense, she claims that the notion of the public sphere is ‘damaging to practices of democracy under conditions of contemporary technoculture’ (p.95). She, therefore, proposes the concept of neodemocracies whose goal is not to reach consensus as required by the norms of the public sphere, but to channel contestation and display the conflicts.

The author agrees with Dean (2003) that the equal, transparent, inclusive, rational, and common-good-oriented public sphere is an aspiration or fantasy. It never existed. The author also agrees that the world is full of conflicts. Instead of introducing a new concept, however, the author agrees with Zhao’s (2008) observation on the public sphere. She maintains that the original notion of public sphere was dehistoricised and idealised. The bourgeois public sphere emerged in the Western European context. It was, in nature, ‘exclusionary’, ‘class-dominated’, antagonistic to subaltern publics, and ‘always constituted by conflict’ (Zhao, 2008, p.13). Despite its non-ideal features, the public sphere has made great achievements in the historical transition to liberal democracy in Western European countries during the nineteenth century. It is a space where people of all descriptions come to exchange information, listen to each other, express their concerns or opinions, and practice the skills for rational discussion. It is also a space where people express conflicting interests, learn about the conflicts, and learn to compromise. It is a space where various, often contradictory and competing ideas collide and then new ideas are born. The author admits that the online public sphere in China is not ideal. It excludes those who have no access to the Internet. It reflects the unequal power relations in reality. It further disadvantages and marginalises vulnerable groups. The author argues, however, that the public sphere in China can be called the Chinese bourgeois public sphere as Zhao (2008) called it and the Chinese public sphere contributes to promoting the transition in China as the bourgeois public sphere historically did.

### 2.2.6 Political participation and disengagement

Political participation is ‘wonderfully well suited as a central theme for post-behavioural political science’ (Salisbury, 1975, p.324) and it is believed to play a very important role in democracy by a diverse range of democratic theories (Krueger, 2005). Political participation is said to promote system stability by legitimising the current regime (Salisbury, 1975). Most importantly, Pateman (1970) and Mill (1991) claimed that political participation facilitated the moral development of individuals. Therefore, the author argues that online political participation provides chances for individuals to practice the skills needed as democratic citizens and helps individuals to realise or tend to believe the values that are conducive to democracy. In a word, online political participation promotes individual’s development to be a democratic citizen, since ‘democracies required democratic citizens, whose specific knowledge, competences, and character would not be as well suited to nondemocratic politics’ (Galston, 2001, p.217). In the following part of this subsection, two questions will be answered: What is political participation? What is online political participation?

Brady (1999) defined political participation as in essence 1) the activity 2) of citizens 3) to influence 4) political decisions. His definition identifies four essential components of political participation. Scholars tend to agree on the first three components of the definition and contest the last for what is considered political decisions. According to Verba and Nie (1973), political participation refers to ‘those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take’ (p.2). Their definition has been widely used (Salisbury, 1975). For example, in their study, Bennett and Bennett (1986) adopted Verba and Nie’s definition and made only a minor adjustment. They defined political participation as ‘actions undertaken by ordinary citizens that are intended, directly or indirectly, to influence the selection of government personnel and/or the policy decisions they make’ (p.160). However, their understanding of political decision can only apply to countries where there is an election of governmental personnel. Moreover, they exclude societal participation that is not aimed at affecting the government (Salisbury, 1975). Drawn on Verba, Schlozman, and Brady’s (1995) work, Hsieh and Li (2014) put forth a broader definition of political participation. They defined it as ‘psychological engagement and behavioral involvement of civic and public affairs with a clear expectation of influencing government actions’ (p. 27). To study the situation in China, the researcher defines political participation even more broadly as the activity of citizens to influence government policy outcomes and to ‘promote or protect the self-interests of individuals and groups’ (Porter, et al., 1981, p.359).

However, Hsieh and Li’s (2014) definition involves two aspects: psychological engagement including for example political interest, political efficacy, political knowledge, and so on; and behavioural involvement including voting, attending civic events, etc.. The definition of the study only contains behavioural involvement. Online political participation refers to any activity of individual users to influence government policy outcomes and to promote or protect the self-interests of individuals and groups through the Internet, for example, to send an email to a government department to make suggestion about government policies.

According to that definition, offline political participation refers to any activity of individual users to influence government policy outcomes and to promote or protect the self-interests of individuals and groups through channels other than the Internet. Although political participation is connoted, its denotation is open in this study for previous studies were conducted or defined in the context of democratic countries or regions (Verba & Schlozman, 1995; Bimber, 2003; Tolber & McNeal, 2008). Political behaviours like voting for national leaders, volunteering or working in campaigns, donating money to political figures, and so on are unique to democratic countries and regions and they do not apply to the Chinese context.

Yu Liu and Qinghua Yang (2014, in Marolt & Herold, 2014) studied Chinese independent candidates’ strategic use of microblogging for online campaigns and political expression. It seems there are campaigns in China, but actually, they can not be regarded as a campaigns at all. China’s constitution says that ‘the people's congresses of cities not divided into districts, municipal districts, counties, autonomous counties, townships, nationality townships and towns are directly elected by voters’ (Constitution, 2004). However, candidates are not chosen by the voters. According to the author’s direct experience at her college time and P05 and P06’s experience, you are allowed to vote from among a list of candidates whom you know nothing about (see Table 50). In their study, one self-announced candidate on his microblog compares his campaign as an independent candidate to participating in a football game in which everything is set up and decided by the government (p.81). The author argues the ‘candidate’ is right that everything is set up and decided by the government, but he does not realise that he just announce his participation in that game and he is not in that game at all, because his online campaign does not help him to get onto the list that the voters are going to choose from. The fact that none the so-called campaigners was elected (Yu Liu & Qinghua Yang, 2014, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014) supports the author’s argument.

They (Yu Liu & Qinghua Yang, 2014, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014) study 20 independent candidates’ microblogging strategies selected by the number of their followers of their microblog, but they do not give the real number of followers. The author searched using the term ‘independent candidate’ on Sina Weibo, the most popular microblogging service in China on 12 Feb 2015, and found a total of 32 accounts labelling themselves as ‘independent candidate’, among which eleven are established by one Macao’ candidate. His account cannot be counted because Macao is under a different system. The most popular account has 1,982 followers and the second most popular has 575 followers. No one else has more than 336 followers and usually they have only dozens of followers. This can be argued to be progress since there are Chinese people who are trying to use the Internet to participate in politics. However, the author argues that it is not a campaign in a democratic sense considering the fact that they are actually excluded from the process and their campaign is hardly influential.

There is an abundance of studies on the relationship between the Internet and political participation. The results vary as both the Internet and political participation are multidimensional concepts and different studies probe the question from different perspectives in different social, political, economic and cultural contexts. It is generally agreed that the use of the Internet as a whole (measured by the time spent online) does not have a significant impact on political participation (Quintelier and Vissers, 2008). The conclusion is not surprising as the Internet is not used mainly for political purposes. For example, 73.8% of teenage Internet users use the Internet to play games in mainland China. However, some Internet activities have been found to be clearly and significantly associated with both on-and-offline political participation, including information consuming, blogging, discussing, and forwarding emails with political content (Quintelier and Vissers, 2008; Homero Gil De Zúñiga, et al., 2009; Woody, Stanley and Weare, 2004).

However, it remains an emerging field since the study of the Internet is young compared with studies of newspapers, broadcasting, and television and its political application is far from fully developed. Although a positive correlation has been found between political participation and some Internet activities, there is a shortage of evidence to support it being a form of causality. It is highly likely that those who are politically active offline tend to engage more in online participation. Moreover, in most studies Internet use or the use of one of its functions is usually analysed as a whole and measured by the time spent on it, which assumes that users participate in the same style. Taking the online forum for example, participants differ in the topics they are interested in and the way they engage. For example, some only visit whereas some will upload news or make short comments.

It is not new to assume that there is one medium experience and one audience when studying the influence of a certain medium use. For example, many critics have blamed television as ‘one the major culprits’ for ‘growing cynicism and apathy about American politics’ (Norris, 1996, p. 474). Norris (1996), however, suggested that many of their claims were based on the assumption that ‘there is one television experience, rather than multiple channels and programs, and one audience, rather than different types of viewers’ (p.475). In this study, therefore, the author regards every participant as a unique individual and their Internet use experience as unique, attempts to explore in great detail their unique experience and perspective, and thus identifies patterns of Internet use that carry political significance from understanding participants’ articulations and perceptions. The opposite to political participation or engagement is political disengagement, namely, disengagement from any activity to influence government policy outcomes or to promote or protect the self-interests of individuals and groups.

### 2.2.7 The role of mass media

The mass media plays a very important role in political life. Mass media is a relatively new thing to democracy. In classic models of democracy, Held (2006) regarded the small city-state, small city community or small non-industrial community in which citizens physically know each other and things going on as the first general condition. In modern societies in which the scope of public issues is beyond the physical scope of citizens, mass media acts as media for citizens to know, communicate and associate. In the liberal ideal, the media is viewed as a watchdog and ‘an agency of information and debate that facilitates the functioning of democracy’ (James, 2000, p.127). ‘A media system that delivers a sufficient supply of meaningful public affairs information to catch the eye of relatively inattentive citizens’ is believed to be one of the required institutional arrangements for political accountability ([Curran, 2008](#_ENREF_1), p.6). In addition, the reach and penetration of media has been found to be positively related to literacy both as a response and a cause (Delia, 1987; Emery and Emery, 1988; [Yang and Shanahan, 2003](#_ENREF_5)). Both the freedom and independence of the media system and the high penetration rate of mass media are essential for the media to fulfil its role as watchdog, an information and communication agency and a tool to increase literacy levels on a massive scale.

However, some scholars believe that mass media undermine democracy or strengthen authoritarian regimes. In capitalist democracies, mass media are heavily influenced by private interests. Habermas (1989) observes that mass media transform ‘literary’ and ‘critically debating’ public into passive consumers and thus a public sphere into a sphere of culture consumption. Mass media is characterised by the concentration of ownership and standardisation of programming (e.g. Bagdikian, 1983; Ettema & Whitney, 1994, cited in Papacharissi, 2002). Mass media is also believed to have ‘failed to inform the public at large’ (Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1970, cited in Polat, 2005, p.440). Television is suggested to be ‘political participation’s enemy number one’ (Gans, 1993, cited in Polat, 2005, p.440) ‘because it has atomized society, it takes too much time, increases cynicism, undermines civic literacy and so on’ (Polat, 2005, p.440). In authoritarian regimes like China, mass media is a part of the state structure (Jiang, 2010) and the mouthpiece of the party-state (Marolt, 2014). Instead of being a public sphere or providing knowledge or plural ideas for meaningful political participation a controlled media system in China ‘largely remains uniformly homogenous in its dissemination of information’ (Herold & Marolt, 2011).

To sum up, the study views democratisation as a long evolutionary process in which a society or a nation moves from one end of the spectrum to the other, instead of a revolutionary point when democracy as a form of government is established. On this spectrum, liberal democracy lies somewhere above the middle point, but still a long way from the other end. This section reflects on the conditions necessary or favourable for the emergence and consolidation of democracy in an attempt to better understand democratisation and to enable assessment of the process. The following two sections fulfil two tasks of the literature review. The first is to compare the political tradition, the dominant political ideas in particular, throughout the authoritarian history of China with democratic values. In doing so, a better understanding of the participants’ perspectives and how their Internet use influences or does not influence the values they believe can be achieved. The second is to examine and measure how far and in which direction mainland China has moved on that spectrum since 1978 using the theoretical framework established in this section. It serves to provide a context to interpret how the offline changes interact with the online world to shape the extent, direction, and forms of Internet’s influence and the reality both online and offline.

## 2.3 China’s political tradition

It is always political culture that is at the centre of Chinese people’s doubt about their own capacity for democracy, as observed by Nathan ([1990](#_ENREF_9)). China has a long history of more than two thousand years of authoritarian regime and the authoritarian political culture has been dominating Chinese society during that period, which has a profound influence on the Chinese political culture and the ideals and values Chinese people believe in. In this section, the dominant Chinese political ideas will be examined in detail and another important factor, the persistence of the authoritarian regime in Chinese history, will also be introduced. The prime goal of this section is to better understand the political culture of contemporary China and the ideals and values Chinese people believe in, from the perspective of China’s political tradition, to examine whether or not use of the Internet influences the ideals and values Chinese people hold and consequently the political culture, and to better understand the participants’ perspectives.

### 2.3.1 Dominant political ideas

Chinese civilisation has had a long tradition of a centralised authoritarian regime, going back as far as the establishment of the Qin Dynasty, its first unified empire, in 221 BC. The dominant political ideas and the political culture built on it have served the authoritarian rule in China. The current Chinese political culture is often seen as ‘an obstacle to Chinese democratisation’ ([He, 1996](#_ENREF_1), p.157). Before the unification of the Qin Dynasty, there had been an era of great cultural and intellectual expansion in China. It lasted from 770 to 221 BC and consisted of two periods: the [Spring and Autumn](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spring_and_Autumn) period (Chinese: 春秋时代, *chunqiu shidai*, 770 – 476 BC) and the [Warring States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warring_States) period (Chinese: 战国时代, *zhanguo shidai*, 475 – 221 BC). During that period, a broad range of thoughts and ideas were developed, and a great number of philosophers and schools flourished, which is historically known as the Contention of a Hundred Schools of Thought (Chinese: 百家争鸣; *baijia zhengming*) (Ban Gu[[5]](#footnote-5), 2007). The major schools included Confucianism, legalism, Taoism, Mohism and the School of Yin-Yang. However, Qin Shi Huang (Chinese: 秦始皇，259 – 210 BC, the first emperor in the history of China) chose legalism as the dominant political thought. Legalism advocated a strict enforcement of laws from above. Its doctrine served to preserve the social order at the beginning of unification when a variety of conflicts existed. Emperor Wu of Han (Chinese: 汉武帝，*Hanwudi*, 156 – 87 BC), the seventh emperor of the Han Dynasty, established the dominant position of Confucianism in China. In the aftermath of the fall of the Han dynasty, the Six Dynasties period (220–589) witnessed the establishment of Buddhism for the first time (Wood, 1995, p.1). It is during the Sung dynasty (960-1279) that ‘the Confucian tradition underwent a revival of major proportions’ and ‘the rebirth of Confucian thought’ ‘created a new frame of reference for Chinese political thought that lasted for the next thousand years until the twentieth century’ (pp.1-2). In such a long period, Confucianism has been deeply rooted in Chinese society and has had a profound influence on the culture and history of China.

Opinions vary as to whether Confucianism is an obstacle to democracy (He, 1996, pp.160-163). Some scholars such as Huntington, Cotton, Price and Pye argued that it is, while other scholars, including Bary, Nathan, Friedman, Liang Shuming, and Lin Yuseng, pointed out positive elements in Confucian culture (He, 1996, pp.160-161). The author argues that both sides are right, in part, as, in the first instance, Confucianism is a complex system of moral, social, political, [philosophical](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_philosophy), and quasi-religious thought. More importantly, it has developed over two thousand years in China and other East Asian countries such as Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, and South Korea, as well as various territories predominantly settled by [Chinese people](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Han_Chinese), such as [Singapore](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_Singapore). It is not surprising to find both pro-democratic and anti-democratic elements in it. Therefore, the key to the debate does not lie in Confucianism itself, but in which part of Confucianism or which branch of Confucianism the ruling class chose to be dominant in society, and how they interpret it in ways that legitimise their ruling.

The dominant political ideas that the ruling class have imposed throughout the authoritarian history of China, the author argues, are anti-democratic and pose one of the obstacles to the democratisation of China. First, Confucianism apotheosises the power of the emperor by taking the emperor to be the son of Heaven. It places the emperor above all people and makes him an unchecked authority. The tradition to apotheosise the ruler has long existed in China, tracing back as far as the Xia Dynasty (Chinese: [夏](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/å¤)[朝](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/æ); *Xia Chao*, 2070 – 1600 BC), the first dynasty in China. It says, in The Announcement of Duke Shao in *The Book of History[[6]](#footnote-6)*, that ‘the Xia Dynasty follows the order of Heaven’. However it was first introduced into Confucianism and systematically developed by Dong Zhongshu (Chinese: 董仲舒, 179 – 104 BC), a Confucian scholar in the Han Dynasty. He was a very important figure in the history of Confucianism and the political ideology in China. We will return to him later.

Secondly, dominant political ideas focus on maintaining social order and stability, or the so-called Great Harmony ([Ogden, 2002](#_ENREF_3), pp.43-44; [He, 1996](#_ENREF_1), p.160). The harmony is believed to be achieved by obedience, individual sacrifice for the benefit of the group, and unification of thought, instead of by conflicts, communication, debates, and compromises. Ogden ([2002](#_ENREF_3), p.41) argued that Chinese people were concerned that pluralism might erode law and order. Pye and Pye ([1985](#_ENREF_1), p.189) held the same view, that diversity and a pluralistic power structure in Chinese culture is believed to lead to social disorder. These thoughts are evident in Chinese ruler’s measures to suppress dissidents (see the next paragraph). Moreover, dominant political ideas emphasise hierarchy ([Ogden, 2002](#_ENREF_3); [Pye and Pye, 1985](#_ENREF_1)) rather than equality. [Ogden (2002](#_ENREF_3), p.45) claimed that ‘the Confucian principles of reciprocal moral obligations and duties… are based on social hierarchy, with differential treatment of individuals depending on rank and relationship to oneself’. ‘It has always been easy for the Chinese to establish bureaucratic hierarchies because they have an instinct for recognising fine status differences’ (Pye and Pye, [1985](#_ENREF_1), p.209). In this hierarchical ladder, the inferior should obey and respect the superior. For example, citizens should obey and respect officials, the younger should obey and honour the elder, and women should be subordinate to men ([Ogden, 2002](#_ENREF_3), p.47). According to Confucius, to govern is to achieve a state where ‘the prince is prince, and the minister is minister; where the father is father, and the son is son’ (*Analects[[7]](#footnote-7)* XII, 11).

Lastly, the dominant political ideas advocate for the rule of virtue (or the rule of men) and unchecked authority instead of the rule of law which is seen as one of the essential democratic procedures (Keane, 1992). [Pye and Pye (1985](#_ENREF_1), p.200) pointed out that it was believed in Chinese culture that ‘rule should be by (virtuous) men and not by (impersonal) law’. [Ogden expressed the same concern. He](#_ENREF_3) argued that ‘the rule of virtue rather than the rule of law’ was thought to be required to achieve harmony, the goal of China’s rulers, according to Chinese political thought [(Ogden, 2002](#_ENREF_3), p.44) and the dominant Chinese tradition attached great importance to ‘the Confucian notion that a ruler’s legitimacy should be based on morality rather than law’ [(Ogden, 2002](#_ENREF_3), p.51). He also stated that ‘China’s thinkers have, for over two thousand years, been concerned primarily with getting moral individuals to rule’ and said ‘little about the issue of limiting their power’. Such an orientation toward virtue is still evident in CPC’s (Communist Party of China) legitimation strategy (Hwang & Schneider, 2011; Schneider & Hwang, 2014).

The dominance of antidemocratic and authoritarian political ideas has been achieved by rigid control and active promotion by the rulers and the civil-service examination system. For example, Qin Shi Huang (Chinese: 秦始皇，259 – 210 BC) ordered all classic works of the Hundred Schools of Thought except those of legalism and all histories in the imperial archives except those written by the Qin historians to be burned. Those discussing particular books, those using ancient examples to satirise contemporary politics, those failing to burn the listed books within 30 days, and authorities failing to report cases were severely punished by execution, imprisonment or banishment. Sometime their families were punished, too. This is called the Burning of the Books[[8]](#footnote-8) in the history of China. Countless scholars and intellectual have suffered imprisonment or other punishment, better or worse, for what they wrote in the history of imperial China, which is called the Literary Inquisition. Severe punishment on the dissidents or so-called dissidents has generated self-censorship.

Apart from the controlling methods, the rulers also boosted the dominance of their chosen thoughts and ideas and achieved unification of thought by its school system and officials’ control. There were a very small number of private schools in imperial China, but the dominant form of academic training occurred in the government’s own schools (Ogden, 2002, pp.51-52). When Emperor Wu of Han (Chinese: 汉武帝，*Hanwudi*, 156 – 87 BC) took Dong Zhongshu’s advice and tried to establish Confucianism as the state philosophy and code of ethics, he promoted Confucian scholars and intellectuals to higher ranks and governmental positions and deposed those of other schools of thought[[9]](#footnote-9). Another important measure that contributed to the success of thought control was the civil service examination system[[10]](#footnote-10). This included the scholars and intellectuals, ‘who might perhaps have been the most logical group to develop “political thought”’ (Ogden, 2002, p.53), into the political system. Ogden argued that ‘China’s potential dissident leaders and thinkers held the highest political positions’ and ‘benefit too much from the system of state power and patronage to want to challenge it’ (Ogden, 2002, p.53).

To sum up, within Confucianism, statements that support democracy can be found. The author also believes that there are elements in the other major schools of thought in China mentioned before and other important aspects of traditional Chinese culture relevant to democratisation. However, they have never taken a dominant position in Chinese culture. Nor have they been translated into social or political policies. The authoritarian rulers in China have taken efficient measures to guarantee that the dominant political ideas serve their governance. However, China has such a long history, vast territory, and big population of various ethnic groups. It would be wrong to assume the above summary of dominant political culture in China could capture the complexity of that picture. It would be wrong to assume that the Chinese authoritarian culture is an undisrupted history of Confucian influence since the later Han dynasty. Actually there have been breaks, like the establishment of Buddhism during the Six Dynasties period, the ‘rejection of the Chinese heritage altogether in favour of Western science and democracy’ advocated by the May Fourth Movement (Wood, 1995). It is also wrong to assume that people’s minds are empty slates that can be ‘programmed’ by elites with particular cultural values, creating an ‘essence’ that then defines national cultures in rather stable ways over an extended period of time.

The author does not agree that the authoritarian values are Chinese. Actually Europe also has a long history of authoritarian ideas and practices. The author does not make these assumptions. Instead, dominant political ideas are introduced and examined to help better understand the particular socio-political environment and cultural tradition that Chinese Internet users are embedded in. the author argues that some norms and doctrines of Confucianism have great influence in the authoritarian history in China. Some are still evident in the Leadership’s strategy to appeal to its people. For example, Hu Jintao’s advocacy of a harmonised society is a modern version of achieving stability by ‘harmonising’ conflicts and dissents. Some are evident in Chinese society, for example, in families and schools, children are still be taught that to obey their parents and teachers is a virtue. The author attempts to explore whether the online world challenges or reinforces these norms or doctrines of Confucianism and how the participants are influenced.

### 2.3.2 Persistence of authoritarian regimes

China has a long history of authoritarian regimes since the founding of the Qin Dynasty. On this long journey, opportunities for China to ‘depart from the authoritarian road occurred repeatedly’ (Ogden, 2002, p.52). In the imperial history of China, there have been a noticeable number of peasant revolts such as the Daze Village Uprising (Chinese: 大泽乡起义, *Daze Xiang Qiyi,* July 209 BC – December 209 BC), an uprising against Qin rule and The Yellow Turban Rebellion (Chinese: 黄巾之乱, *Huangjin Zhiluan*, 184 AD) a peasant rebellion against Emperor Lingdi of the Han Dynasty of China. Some did succeed in overthrowing the reigning emperor and his ministers, though never have they established a democratic regime (Chesneaux, 1973). The authoritarian regimes persist in China and there must be reasons for that.

The author makes no claim that the authoritarian political ideas deeply rooted in Chinese society have determined or will determine Chinese people’s attitudes to, behaviour towards or choice of democracy. For one thing, a pro-democratic political culture is important for democracy but not indispensable. For another, ‘a political culture is not fixed and transcendent but changeable and entangled in reciprocal relationships with various social, economic and political institutions’ ([He, 1996](#_ENREF_1), p.157). It is also unreasonable to assume that China will not become a democracy because it never has been. The fact that Europe also has a long history of authoritarian ideas and practices is living evidence. Nor does the author claim that the Chinese people are passive receivers of what the ruling class choose to prevail as mainstream. The two important factors of China’s political tradition - the dominant political ideas and the persistence of the authoritarian regime in China - are introduced for three reasons. In the first place, it helps to explain and better understand the Chinese political system. Secondly, the author wants to draw attention to the study of the complicated factors and forces (they cannot be covered in this thesis) that have shaped China’s political tradition and system and will probably shape the political future of China. The author argues that any conclusion on the democratic future of China without seriously examining those factors is unreliable. The last, but the most important reason, is that it provides the background to interpret why the participants used the Internet or understood their Internet use in certain ways and whether they perceived that Internet use changed some of their values or the Internet had changed the political culture in mainland China.

## 2.4 Contemporary China in the process of democratisation

Since the reform and opening-up began in 1978, China has been undergoing a major economic transition from a command economy to a market economy and political reform to enhance the capability of the state and CPC (Communist Party of China) to rule. The economic transition and political reform have brought dramatic changes to China including rapid and stable economic growth, increasing living standards, expansion of education, rising rates of literacy, expansion of urbanisation, remarkable development of mass media, the rise of civil society, institutionalisation of the rule of law and people’s rights, and so on. However, the above-mentioned factors that push China in the direction of liberal democracy are the same factors that compose the CPC’s legitimation strategy (Schneider & Hwang, 2014). Moreover, there are limitations to the reform and the achievements. For example, both the economic and political reform were incomplete. Not all people equally share the benefits of economic growth, which is observable through the widening disparity of wealth. The autonomy of individuals and social associations is still limited.

While there is only one actuality of what has happened in China since 1978, the perspectives on, and the interpretations of, that period of contemporary China differ greatly and often contradict each other. There are scholars who tend to believe that transition in China will lead to a capitalist or neoliberal authoritarian regime rather than a liberal democracy. There had been signs of democratisation including introduction of free markets, localisation of economic and political power, and so on in the early 2000s. ‘Power sharing and institution building’ increasingly becomes a part of authoritarian’s strategy to survive (Morozov, 2011, p.87). However, ‘the fact that authoritarian governments are adjusting their operating methods’ should not be interpreted as ‘a sign of democratisation’ (Morozov, 2011, p.90). The CPC has made simultaneous efforts to liberalise the economy and open up China to the world while rejecting Western-style political reforms (Hwang & Schneider, 2011).

The economic transition proceeded within the existing political and social structure to benefit the politically privileged and the economic elites newly produced by the free market (Harvey, 2007; Zhao, 2008). Through privatising the state-owned or collectively-owned properties into their own pockets and advantaging themselves in the free market utilising their political privilege, the CPC and the political elites reinforce their power by securing the overwhelmingly larger proportion of the benefits from economic growth and becoming economic elites with the political privilege in their hands at the same time. With the widening disparity, the weak become even weaker and are equipped with no means to challenge the authority. Moreover, through manipulating media discourse enabled by its tight control over the communication in China and appealing to the urban middle class, rapid and stable economic growth within a ‘harmonious’ or harmonised (the way Chinese people describe it) society has been utilised to legitimise the CPC’s capacity to rule. Information and communication technologies are used to reinforce the current power relation and legitimise the current regime instead of undermining it (Morozov, 2011; Schlaeger, 2013). For example, the e-government programme contributes to increasing legitimacy and reinforcement of power relations at local government level by reducing over-the-counter corruption and increasing efficiency (Schlaeger, 2013). As a result, the neoliberal path China has been taking (Harvey, 2007) does not lead it to political liberalisation. Instead, it serves to consolidate the existing political and social structure.

Some scholars (eg. Berger, 1986; Ogden, 2002; and Shi, 2006) maintain that economic liberalisation will inevitably invoke corresponding political and social liberalisation and thus arrive at a liberal democracy. They observe that incompatibility of the free market and the Soviet-style[[11]](#footnote-11) political and social structure required political reform to accompany economic reform, which produced and sustained remarkable economic growth in China. Political changes such as decentralisation and localisation of political and economic power, constitutionalisation of the rule of law, institutionalisation of political rights and the direct election of village committee leaders and members by the residents of the village, and so on, direct political reform in China to liberalisation. In addition, the introduction of free market and economic growth resulting from both economic and political reform and the free market has improved the Chinese people’s living standard, increased the level and rate of literacy and education, expanded urbanisation, and fostered the development of civil society and mass media. The incremental transition provides a fertile ground upon which liberal democracy will grow. There are scholars (eg. Zhao, 2008) who do not believe that China is ‘an openly committed neoliberal formation’ or that the post-Mao leadership are committed to neoliberalism. Yet, they have to admit that China’s post-1989 accelerated transition is characterised by ‘neoliberal governmentality’ (p.6). It is reasonable to assume that China’s pragmatic utilisation of neoliberalism or capitalism as a ‘technology of governing’ might lead to the establishment of liberal democracy.

The Chinese official discourse, and some scholars, purport another interpretation. They advocate that China may experiment and initiate a much needed new model of democracy other than liberal democracy, be it a socialist democracy (democracy with Chinese character) or the populist model of democracy (He, 1996). Liberal democracy is not the most desirable democracy, nor the most democratic arrangement, but the only one practicable till now and some aspects of the classical liberal legacy ‘have been profoundly hostile to democracy’ (Beetham, 1992, p.43). Liberal or capitalist democracy has been criticised as the rule of the propertied because the institution of representation and ‘patterns of political participation favour traditionally advantaged groups’ (Hindman, 2010, p.21; Beetham, 1992). The failure of the attempts that have been made to experiment with new models of democracy rather than liberal democracy by the end of the twentieth century does not prove that there is not a possibility of other alternatives or better models (Beetham, 1992; Chomsky, 2013). China’s transformation since 1978 took a path with Chinese character. As a result, China ‘managed to construct a form of state-manipulated market economy’ (Harvey, 2007, p.122). Compared with Russia and central European countries that took a ‘shock therapy’ path, China has managed to ‘avert the economic disaster’ (p.122). Moreover, it has ‘delivered spectacular economic growth and rising standards of living for a significant proportion of the population’. Although the path has led to ‘environmental degradation’, ‘social inequality’, and something looking like ‘the reconstitution of capitalist class power’, these problems are not problems unique to China, but side products of capitalism (Beetham, 1992; Harvey, 2007). The Chinese model reaps the fruits of market liberalisation while controlling some, though not all, of the side effects of free markets or liberalism. Therefore, it is plausible to conclude that it is possible for China to succeed in its experiment of finding a better democratic model.

It is safe to conclude that it is difficult to predict the direction of transition as Shambaugh (2008) claims. In order to survive as the single ruling party in China, the CPC has been both proactive and reactive in instituting both economic and political reforms. The CPC has proved to be very adaptable and flexible so far, but it ‘is only partially in control of its own fate’ (Shambaugh, 2008, p.4). The goal of this section is to produce a critical reflection on the transitional process in mainland China since 1978 using the theory of democratisation developed in Section 2.2. In doing so, it draws an outline of the complex picture of China’s gradual and incremental transformation of economic and political systems shaped by numerous factors among which the Internet is one, not even among the most important ones. The development of the Internet has been interacting with these and other factors to exert its influence in this process. Therefore, it is important to unfold that picture before going into a detailed examination of what role the Internet has played in it.

### 2.4.1 Economic reform and opening-up policy

In 1978 the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CPC (Communist Party of China) was held, which initiated the political and economic reform and the opening-up policy. Since then, economic growth has been taken as the cornerstone of party legitimacy (Hachigian, 2001). There was a phase of exploration and experimenting in the decade from 1978 to about 1988. The economic reform was started from a rural area by ‘starving peasants and desperate local cadre in Feixi county, Anhui’ ([Hamrin, 1990](#_ENREF_1), p.5) with the household contract responsibility system. After a period of experimental implementation in some rural areas as well as evaluation and research, on January 1, 1982, the CPC (Communist Party of China) Central Committee approved ‘National rural work meeting minutes’ and accepted the household contract responsibility system in rural areas as a part of socialist collective economy[[12]](#footnote-12). The household contract responsibility system was then carried out nationwide. Since 1980, China has established and extended special economic zones[[13]](#footnote-13) firstly from four cities in Guangdong Province and Fujian Province, to 14 coastal cities in 1984, to the entire province of Hainan in 1988, to a vast area along the coast and in the Yangtze River valley in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

A comprehensive deep reform was first proposed in the third plenary session of the Thirteenth CPC Congress in 1988. Since the early 1990s, China has entered the second phase of reform and opening-up, commonly referred to in the PRC (the People’s Republic of China) as ‘deep reform’ (Chinese: 深化改革, *shenhuan gaige*). [Dittmer and Liu (2006](#_ENREF_1), p.2) believed that it ‘had been changing the nature of Chinese politics, economics and society’. It consists of economic and political reform. The economic reform includes domestic reform and the opening-up policy. During the second phase, the domestic economic reform went deeper and broader. A complete market economy, or a so-called socialist market economy, instead of ‘a half economy between plan and market’, has been clearly set as a goal of domestic economic reform since 1992 when the Fourteenth CPC Congress decided to establish a ‘socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics’. [Berger (1986](#_ENREF_1)) proposed that the opening up, to increasing degrees, of market forces to a socialist economy would make democratic governance possible.

The Chinese government has been gradually withdrawing its economic control of resources, capital, labour, energy, and industrial and commercial inputs and outputs. For example, the marketisation of housing provision has been comprehensively pushed forward nationwide from 1994 to 1997. Another example is the government’s quitting its responsibility for the assignment of jobs. It had been the government that assigned a job to every graduate from technical secondary schools, colleges and universities. In 1985, the experiment began from Shanghai Jiao Tong University and Tsinghua University[[14]](#footnote-14). The new policy allowed graduates to choose their employers and employers to choose the graduates as their employees without interference from the government. The reform was accomplished in 1999, marked by a notification, ‘Relevant Regulations about the Start Using of Report Cards[[15]](#footnote-15),[[16]](#footnote-16) for Graduates of Colleges and Universities’, sent by the Ministry of Education of PRC. Such a policy greatly freed students of technical secondary schools, colleges and universities from government control.

With the advancement of ownership reform and privatisation and restructure of state-owned enterprises, there has been a remarkable growth of the mixed ownership economy. Statistical data from the State Administration for Industry and Commerce of PRC demonstrate increasing number of registered private enterprises, growing registered capital of private enterprises, rising number of people working for private enterprises and registered individually-owned businesses, and growth in tax revenue from private enterprises and individual-owned businesses[[17]](#footnote-17). The new economic reform has penetrated into broader areas of the Chinese economy such as the fiscal and tax system, the income distribution system, the securities market, the real estate property rights and so on[[18]](#footnote-18).

The open-door policy has progressed to a comprehensive opening. The government has gradually lost its control over foreign trade licenses and reformed its exchange rate system and export and import taxation system to encourage international trade. Preferential policies have been made to attract foreign investment and to encourage Chinese people to invest in foreign countries or regions. Local government was allowed more freedom in decision-making and policy-making to create a favourable environment for foreign investment[[19]](#footnote-19). Extraordinary achievements have been made in international trade, foreign investment in China and investment in foreign countries and regions[[20]](#footnote-20). China has become the world’s third largest foreign trader next to the United States and Germany with a sharp rise in total imports and exports from US$ 20,000 million in 1978 ([Dittmer and Liu, 2006](#_ENREF_1), p.4) to US$ 2.27 billion in 2007[[21]](#footnote-21).

As a consequence of the economic reform and the opening-up policy, China has gained multiple benefits, chiefly an accelerated economic growth rate. At the same time, the gradual decentralisation of economic power, the diversification of the economy and increasing integration with the world has pushed China a step closer to democracy. It led to a more favourable environment for a pluralist society and the growth of civil society in China and urged the government to implement political reform accordingly.

A free market economy and enterprises of mixed ownership produced a great number of entities and individuals economically independent from the state, such as owners and employees of private enterprises and owners of individual businesses. They, as [Ogden (2002](#_ENREF_2), p.94) argued, began to ‘assert their own interests, even sometimes against the interests of the state’. People with common intentions, desires and interests came together to form a great variety of groups and thus social organisations flourished. Although the government had strict regulations about the management of social organisations and their activities, people always found ways to bypass them, for example to register as an affiliation to a government unit or as a business institute. Yang (2003b) reviewed studies of civil society in reform-era China which revealed that ‘existing forms of social organization have undergone change, new associational forms have appeared, and social organizations in general have proliferated’ (p.456). By the end of 2002, there were some 133,357 registered social organisations and 700,000 civilian non-profit institutions ([Dittmer and Liu, 2006](#_ENREF_1)). In addition, people began to voice their interests, ideas and opinions individually and collectively through various means. According to [Ogden (2002](#_ENREF_2), p.82), ‘in 1998, there were more than 5,000 reported collected protests’ (protests by more than one person). *People Daily* Online listed *Top Ten Events of Civil Society Development in China in 2009[[22]](#footnote-22)*, which demonstrated how Chinese people of different social background and status expressed their opinions, negotiated with the government and enterprises, and took action to protect their rights and interests.

Take the top one in the list of *Top Ten Events of Civil Society Development in China in 2009* as an example. A research report by a team at the School of Public Policy and Management at Tsinghua University raised people’s doubts about misuse of the 76,712 million RMB earthquake relief endowments by the Government. The heated debates forced the department of civil affairs of Sichuan province to reveal information about the use of the endowments through the Internet and other mass media and more profoundly it promoted the making of a law on charities. The society has more to negotiate with the government and holds the government to account as the non-state-owned economy has been playing an increasingly important role in the economic development of China and the fiscal revenue of the government and each social organisation negotiates with the government its own niche. CPC began to officially welcome entrepreneurs into the party when Jiang Zemin openly advocated the ‘three represents’ at the meeting celebrating the 80th anniversary of the founding of the CPC on July 1, 2001, and the number of private entrepreneurs in the party has been growing. Harik (1996, p.46) argued that a government is more likely to be authoritarian when it is more involved in managing the various aspects of a society and economy. On the contrary, according to [Ogden (2002](#_ENREF_2), p.94), it is arguable that the Chinese government had less reason and less ability to be authoritarian with fewer sectors of the society and economy under its control. [Dittmer and Liu (2006](#_ENREF_1), p.16) also asserted that citizens had more responsibility for their own welfare as the government downsized further.

Moreover, commerce creates interdependences between individuals and provides economic incentives for the members of different groups to interact with each other (Muldoon, Borgida and Cuffaro, 2011). This is of great relevance to the situation in China, because the Party and the government had control over all the resources and were at the top of the hierarchy before the economic reform and consequently did not have any incentives to communicate, negotiate, or interact with people at the lower levels.

In addition, as a consequence of profound socioeconomic changes resulting from comprehensive and deep economic reform and opening-up, the internal and external pressures for more political reform have intensified (Mason, 1994). Dwight (1997) emphasised the requirement for ‘a government that could provide the needed infrastructure for development, including stable and supportive policy and a stable legal environment for private (or public) investors’ (p.29). [Dittmer and Liu (2006](#_ENREF_1), p.5) also pointed out that ‘the contradiction between deep economic reform and slow political reform has become a bottleneck for the next stage of China’s reform’.

### 2.4.2 Political reform

The success of economic reform in China largely depends on its political reform, and at the same time, the success of economic reform increased ‘the possibility of political transformation’ by breaking the balance of power and shifting power in the direction of the newly-created socio-economic forces ([White, et al., 1996](#_ENREF_13), p.2). The success of the Chinese gradual and incremental transformation model backs John McMillan and Barry Naughton’s argument that partial reform that began with economic reform without political reform can bring a fundamental transformation of the political system ([Goldstein, 1995](#_ENREF_3)). To maintain rapid and reasonably equitable economic growth and to cope with the problems which emerged in the course of reform and opening-up, the Chinese government has launched political reform alongside economic reform. Moreover, Shambaugh (2008) observes that the CPC ‘undertook very systematic assessments of the causes of collapse’ of the ruling parties in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, analysed ‘the range of internal and external challenges to itself, and learned from ‘surviving communist states, single-party authoritarian states, multiparty systems, and social democratic systems’ (pp.1-2). Contrary to many Western scholars and journalists’ belief that ‘there has not been any political reform in China’, Shambaugh (2008) argues that the CPC ‘has been very proactive in instituting reforms within itself and within China’ ‘intended to strengthen the party’s ruling capacity’ (p.2). This section introduces four aspects of political reform in China: administrative reform, localisation of government power, the rule of law, and institutionalisation of political rights in rural areas. This demonstrates how the Chinese government has been changing in the direction of democracy.

Administrative reform began with the cutting of civil servants ([Dittmer & Liu, 2006](#_ENREF_1)). Although the policy has been proved to be unsuccessful for government institutions – which became bloated once again after each project – it shows the government’s recognition of the problem and constant effort to solve it. Another essential step of administrative reform is the institutionalisation of political elite selection from the top to the basic level. The selection and recruitment of civil servants has been institutionalised. Standard procedures, such as the civil servant examination, and standard criteria, for example the requirement of educational qualifications, have been established. As a result, there have been dramatic improvements in the educational qualifications of local officials.

The central government has been retreating from much daily administration, which resulted in ‘a partial dispersal of authority from centre to localities’ ([Hamrin, 1990](#_ENREF_1), p.5). In other words, ‘power has gravitated to officials at lower levels’ ([Ogden, 2002](#_ENREF_3), p.95). Although decentralisation and localisation of economic and some political power does not necessarily lead to less authoritarianism or less bureaucratism, it produces a better chance for democracy. Local citizens know better about local issues and local issues concern their interests more. Thus they are more motivated to participate in politics.

In 1997, the 15th CPC National Congress decided to make ‘the rule of law’ a basic strategy. In 1999, ‘the People's Republic of China exercises the rule of law, building a socialist country governed according to law’ was added to the Constitution, ushering in a new chapter in China’s efforts to promote the rule of law. According to Pan Wei (2006, p.7), rule of law is believed in the West to be an inherent part of democracy and democracy is supplemented by law. Although China is far from being able to claim to be a ‘rule of law’ country, because of obstacles such as its dependent legal institutions and the lack of competence and professionalism of its judges ([Horsley](#_ENREF_1), 2007; [Orts, 2001](#_ENREF_3)), it has moved a long way from the primary ‘rule of man’ and ‘rule by law’ (as an instrument of government) governance towards the ‘rule of law’ ([Horsley](#_ENREF_1), 2007; [Orts, 2001](#_ENREF_3); [Zhao, 2006](#_ENREF_3)). Extraordinary achievements have been made in the reform of the legal system including the constitutionalisation of the rule of law, revision of the Chinese constitution and laws, increasing transparency and accessibility of the legal institutions and law making process, expansion of legal education and a growing number of lawyers and legal scholars, regular exposure of legal cases by the media and increasing awareness of the law and participation in law making by the people.

From 1982, the Chinese constitution has been revised several times, in 1993, 1997, 1999, and 2004, which has led to the legitimisation of the market economy, the rule of law, private ownership and human rights. Recent practices such as consulting scholars and interest groups, holding hearings, publishing draft legislation for public opinion and so on, demonstrate that the legal institutions such as the different levels of the People’s Congress (PC) and the courts and the legal process have been becoming more professional, transparent, participatory and responsive to the concerns of the people. Laws, like the 1989 Administrative Litigation Law and the 1994 State Compensation Law, make the government subject to law and accountable to its citizens. There has been an increase in the number of lawyers from 2,000 in 1979 to 120,000 in 2004 and development of legal education in both quantity (from two functioning law schools in 1979 to over 500 law schools in 2004) and quality ([Horsley](#_ENREF_1), 2007). Legal scholars and lawyers became forces to promote the advancement of legal reform by participating in government consultation, representing less-fortunate groups and the like. The media reports legal cases on a regular basis. This improves the awareness of the law and the rights of the people and becomes a driving force of legal reform.

The factors that underpin the effort of the Chinese central government and the CPC are complex. On the one hand, the healthy development of a free market and increasing integration with the world’s economy demands according legal reform to secure a more stable and predictable economic and political system and to be consistent with international conventions. On the other hand, the Chinese central government and the CPC tend to rely more on the ‘rule of law’ to control the local governments and private sectors and cope with problems like corruption which emerged in the course of reform as the decentralisation of authority continued. In other words, a society with more and more independent groups and individuals tends to depend on an independent (neutral), consistent, equal and transparent legal system with set laws to maintain order. One could argue that it is ‘rule by law’ instead of ‘rule of law’ since it is CPC that employs laws as a way of control. Even it is ‘rule by law’, it still marks progress compared to ‘rule by man’ which is subjective, inconsistent, unequal and intransparent.

The selection of leaders through competitive, open, free and fair elections by the people they govern is believed to be the central procedure and the essence of democracy (Huntington, 1991). The experimental election of leaders in China began in the rural areas. The Organic Law of Village Committees (OLVC, 1987, revised 1998) institutionalised the direct election of the chairman, vice chairman, and members of village committees by the residents of the village. Under OLVC, village committees are autonomous mass organisations through which villagers manage their own affairs, educate themselves, and meet their own needs, rather than as part of the state apparatus (Article 2). Village committees control things people care about. For example, they own a village’s land and usually have ‘veto power to decide the general use of village resources (Oi, 1996, p.137; Oi and Rozelle, 2000). Although obstacles still exist to achieving completely fair, open and competitive elections, evidence shows that village committee elections have spread nationwide and had a positive impact on local governance ([Ogden, 2002](#_ENREF_2); Shi, 2006). In a 1993 nationwide survey, 75.8% of rural residents reported village committee elections have been held in their villages and 51.6% of them reported that elections had been semi competitive (Shi, 2006, pp.353-354). Moreover, a positive relation has been found between congruence between villagers and local cadres on a variety of policy issues and competitive village committee elections (Manion, 1996). It can be seen that notable efforts have been made to ‘heighten cadre responsiveness and draw rural residents into the local polity’ (Kevin, 2006). At the same time, village committee elections did lead to increased participation of villagers in local polity and increased awareness of rights ([Ogden, 2002](#_ENREF_2); Shi, 2006). Therefore, the right of villagers to participate in the choice of their leaders through elections is believed to be an important step towards democratisation in China ([Ogden, 2002](#_ENREF_2); Shi, 2006).

Whether it is an active choice of the Chinese leaders or reformers or it is an inevitable result of economic reform and according social changes, the Chinese government has made extraordinary achievements in many aspects of political reform. Baogang Guo (2006) argued that the Chinese government had shown remarkable adaptability to a changing political environment. Ogden argued that ‘electoral and legal reforms and administrative and economic decentralisation are helping the political system evolve toward a more pluralistic and even democratic form’ ([2002](#_ENREF_2), p.85).

### 2.4.3 Standard of living, urbanisation, education and media exposure

Since the reform and opening up policy began in 1978, China has witnessed a long-term, sustaining, rapid and stable economic growth with an average annual GDP growth rate of 9.8% in the 29 years from 1979 to 2007[[23]](#footnote-23). During the same period, the standard of living of Chinese people has improved dramatically. The per capita disposable income of urban households has risen from 343.4 RMB to 13,786 RMB and the per capita net income of rural households has increased from 133.6 RMB to 4,140 RMB. The data of another indicator of the standard of living, the Engel coefficient[[24]](#footnote-24), supports this conclusion. The Engel coefficient of urban households has dropped from 57.5% to 36.6% and that of rural households from 67.7% to 43.1%[[25]](#footnote-25). [Friedman (2005](#_ENREF_1)) even predicted in his book, *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*, ‘the beginnings of a political liberalization’ in China within a near future of several decades if ‘the very rapid growth rate and increase in standard of living’ having been achieved over the past twenty-five years continued.

Both education and urbanisation have experienced impressive expansion since 1978. In order to serve economic growth, the Chinese government has been making great efforts to improve education at every level and notable achievements have been accomplished. There were a total of 169 institutions of higher education by the end of 1978 after the Unified National Higher Education Entrance Examination[[26]](#footnote-26) had been restored in November 1977[[27]](#footnote-27). According to the data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China, there were 796 higher education institutions at the graduate level, 2,305 four-year, three-year and vocational higher education institutions, 384 higher education institutions for adult students and 812 other private higher education institutions[[28]](#footnote-28). In 1986, *The Compulsory Education Law* was enacted and it states that ‘the state shall institute a system of nine-year compulsory education’ (Article 2). In 1992, education was defined as part of the tertiary sector of the economy in the *Decision on Accelerating Development of the Tertiary Sector of the Economy* by the Central Committee of CPC and the State Council. In 1999, *The CPC Central Committee and the State Council’s Decision on Deepening Reform: Push forward All-Round Quality Education* set the goal to expand the scale of senior middle school and higher education and the policy to stimulate domestic demand and development of relevant industries by education consumption. As a result, there has been a noticeable growth of middle school and higher education (see Table 1), the higher education in particular. It is worthy to note another important phenomenon in education: the rapid increase of Chinese overseas students and those who returned to China after their graduation (see Table 2). The expansion of education has increased people’s literacy and very likely their demands for a range of political and civil freedoms (see Chapter 2, 2.2.4).

*Table 1. Comparison between rate of population age 6 and over by educational level[[29]](#footnote-29)*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Item: Rate of Population Age 6 and Over By Educational Level | 1982 | 1990 | 2009 |
| Junior Middle School (grade 7-9) | 20.03% | 26.50% | 41.67% |
| Senior Middle School (grade 10-12) | 7.48% | 9.04% | 13.80% |
| Higher Education (above grade 12) | 0.68% | 1.59% | 7.29% |

*Table 2. Statistics of Chinese overseas students from 1978 to 2009[[30]](#footnote-30)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Year | Chinese Overseas Students | Returned Chinese Overseas Students[[31]](#footnote-31) |
| 1978 | 860 | 248 |
| 1980 | 2124 | 162 |
| 1985 | 4888 | 1424 |
| 1986 | 4676 | 1388 |
| 1987 | 4703 | 1605 |
| 1988 | 3786 | 3000 |
| 1989 | 3329 | 1753 |
| 1990 | 2950 | 1593 |
| 1991 | 2900 | 2069 |
| 1992 | 6540 | 3611 |
| 1993 | 10742 | 5128 |
| 1994 | 19071 | 4230 |
| 1995 | 20381 | 5750 |
| 1996 | 20905 | 6570 |
| 1997 | 22410 | 7130 |
| 1998 | 17622 | 7379 |
| 1999 | 23749 | 7748 |
| 2000 | 38989 | 9121 |
| 2001 | 83973 | 12243 |
| 2002 | 125179 | 17945 |
| 2003 | 117307 | 20152 |
| 2004 | 114682 | 24726 |
| 2005 | 118515 | 34987 |
| 2006 | 134000 | 42000 |
| 2007 | 144000 | 44000 |
| 2008 | 179800 | 69300 |
| 2009 | 229300 | 108300 |

China has been experiencing rapid urbanisation since the economic reform starting in 1978. The number of cities increased from 191 in 1978 to 667 in 1999[[32]](#footnote-32). Moreover, the urban share of the national population increased from 17.9%[[33]](#footnote-33) in 1978 to 46.6%[[34]](#footnote-34) in 2009, while the share of the national population employed by the secondary and tertiary sectors rose from 17.3% and 12.2% in 1978 to 27.8% and 34.1% respectively, while the share in the first sector dropped from 70.5% to 38.1%[[35]](#footnote-35). Chen and Qin (2014) argue that rapid urbanisation is ‘improving social mobility’ and creating massive opportunities for people in lower social classes in China’ (p. 528).

Donald et al. (2002) divided the development of the media system into three periods in terms of regulation: pre-reform, 1980-99 and post-2000. During the pre-reform period, mass media were under direct control of CPC and the government, and served as a tool of propaganda and ‘mass mobilization’ ([Donald et al., 2002](#_ENREF_1), p.8). The years between 1980 and 1999 was a period of ‘deregulation and diminution of subvention for media industries’ (Donald et al., 2002, p.6). 1989 marked the end of the democratic discourse of the media system in China and the beginning of rapid commercialisation (Zhao, 1998). Market forces began to rapidly penetrate every aspect of news media operations (Chan, 1993). The defining feature of the media system during this period (1990-1999) was the interlocking of Party control and market forces. Since 2000, deregulation and commercialisation have gone deeper and broader. Donald, et al. (2002) summarised the media system as an ‘architect state model’ in which the ‘state facilitates regulatory guidelines for investment in infrastructure’ (p.6). As a result of deregulation and commercialisation of the media system and other driving forces such as economic and technological development, there has been a dramatic development of the media, a distancing of media organisations from the state, an increase of autonomy in media operation and increasing freedom for Chinese people to choose.

The media has witnessed dramatic growth in the types of media, infrastructure and content. Compared with the limited types of media before the reform, there is now the Internet, pay and satellite TV platforms, DVD, VCD, cellular telephones, broadband cable, digital TV, WAPs, iMODE, and other new media technologies. The penetration rate of radio broadcasting, television and movies reached 96.31%, 97.23% and 38%[[36]](#footnote-36) respectively by the end of 2009. There were 2,521 radio broadcasting programmes, 3,337 television channels, 1,687 movie theatres[[37]](#footnote-37), about 7,037 million books, 3,153 million magazines and 43,911 million newspapers published[[38]](#footnote-38) in 2009. Although state control over the media system still exists in China, it does not necessarily translate into ‘compliance by producers with chapter and verse of the regulatory canon’ (Donald, et al., 2002, p.7). The sheer size of the media sectors makes it difficult for guidelines and policies to be implemented and enforced (Keane, 2001; Chan, 1996, p.103). Furthermore, even under control, media work as an amplifier of social changes, improve people’s literacy ([Lerner and Pevsner, 1958](#_ENREF_2)), and promote people’s need to change by showing them how other people live (Schramm, 1964).

Commercialisation embedded in a privately owned media environment has raised ‘a widening concern everywhere about sexism and racism in the commercial media’ due to market-driven programming (Keane, 1992, p.119) and has also been blamed for unrepresentativeness (Keane, 1992), deepening digital divide and undermining the public sphere and democratic decision making (Wilhelm, 2000) in the democratic countries. Canada, Australia and European countries developed a public service media model to preserve the freedom of media from both state and market forces (Keane, 1992). Moreover, to survive and develop in a ‘free’ market in an authoritarian regime, non-governmental, commercial agents also choose to compromise and cooperate with the CPC in creation of cultural products that legitimise the current political system (Schneider & Hwang, 2014). Nevertheless, market-driven media has been considered by some scholars as ‘a necessary condition of democracy’ (Keane, 1992, p.118). For example, Howard (2001) argued that barriers to ‘entry into the digitally mediated public sphere’ are ‘actually dropping because of market pressures’ in the USA (p.949). Therefore, the author argues that the commercialisation and dramatic growth of media in China since 1980 mark progress and are conducive to democratic development despite the fact that state control over the media system still exists and negative effects accompany positive effects of privately owned media. After all, the introduction of market forces changes the situation before commercialisation of media in which the CPC was the sole force that greatly shapes the direction of media development in China.

To sum up, China has been experiencing dramatic economic, political, and social changes since 1978. Economic growth and rising living standards resulting from the economic reform have expanded the inclusivity according to the logic of liberal or capitalist democracy (see section 2.2.4). Consequently, increased rate and level of education and literacy has enhanced people’s willingness and ability to protect their rights and perform their democratic obligations. The gradual decentralisation of economic power, the diversification of the economy and increasing integration with the world has led to a more favourable environment for a pluralist society and the growth of civil society in China. Moreover, economic reform and political reform interplay with each other, which has brought a fundamental transformation of the political system. As a result of commercialisation, the media has witnessed dramatic growth in the types of media, infrastructure and content and also become favourable for democracy. Therefore, the author argues that China has been moving in the direction of democracy since 1978 despite all the negative side effects some of which are inevitable in free markets. However, it is beyond the scope of the thesis to explore where China will arrive since there are still various possibilities. As Zhao (2008) describes, China has been ‘a contradictory entity’ and ‘a site of struggle between competing bureaucratic interests, divergent social forces, and different visions of Chinese modernity.’ It is not clear yet which vision will finally become reality.

## 2.5 The development of the Internet in China

In the last two decades, China has witnessed an unparalleled development of the Internet and the explosive increase in Internet users. According to *The 35rd Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* publicised by CNNIC, the number of Internet users has soared to 649 million by the end of December 2014. The following section will introduce the development of the Internet in China and the role of the Chinese government in its development. The debate around the political impact of the nine Internet services this research found most influential to its participants will be presented in Chapter 4 with the findings of participants’ Internet use.

The Chinese government plays an important and active role in shaping Internet development in China in terms of policy-making, financial support, surveillance and censorship, and the e-government programme. The Chinese government has recognised that the Internet is indispensable to economic growth (Taubman, 1998; [Hachigian, 2001](#_ENREF_1)), and it cannot be ‘contained within national borders’ (Wu, 1996). It is stated in the report of the Internet in China in the white paper of the Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China that:

The Chinese government has fully recognised the irreplaceable role that the Internet plays in promoting national economic development, the advancement of science and technology, and informatisation of social service, and attaches great importance to and actively boost the development and application of the Internet (China, 2010).

In order to take full advantage of the economic, educational, and informational potential of the Internet, the Chinese government ‘has supported the development of the Internet as a tool for business, entertainment, education, and information exchange’ (MacKinnon, 2007, p.31). From 1997 to 2009, the Chinese government has invested 4.3 billion RMB into the construction of the Internet infrastructure (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2010). On the other hand, the Chinese government is well aware of the challenges that the free flow of information online and the social-networking capacity of the Internet may bring. Nevertheless, the Chinese government has maintained the balance between the development and the risk. No immediate threats to the rule of the government and the party have been generated so far while China is enjoying the benefits of the development of the Internet.

The Internet has experienced exponential growth in China, which now has the world’s largest number of Internet users, 250 million IPv4 addresses and 11.21 million domain names. By the end of 2008, the sale of Internet industry had reached 0.65 billion RMB; by the end of 2009, the market scale of Internet advertisements had reached 20,000 million RMB and the market scale of Internet games was 25,800 million RMB (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2010). At the same time, ‘China operates the most extensive, technologically sophisticated, and broad-reaching system of Internet filtering in the world’ (OpenNet Initiative, 2005). The Chinese government’s control and influence over the Internet is implemented in three major ways: subsidy, structure regulation and content control. Subsidy refers to the financial support that the government provides to support or promote certain programmes or content favouring the regime of the government. Structure regulations – like limits on cross-ownership of media – build restrictions into the structure and organisation of media ownership and management. Content control involves regulations, laws, and technologies employed to filter out unacceptable content and block unacceptable access to certain websites.

The tight control of the Chinese government raised concern from scholars worldwide. A number of studies have criticised the censorship in China ([Taubman, 1998](#_ENREF_80); Qiu, 1999/2000; Boas & Kalathil, 2001; [Hachigian, 2001](#_ENREF_38); Harwit & Clark, 2001; Tsui L., 2001; Walton, 2001; [Edelman, 2003](#_ENREF_24); [Hughes & Wacker, 2003](#_ENREF_43); Kalathil, 2003; [BOAS, 2004](#_ENREF_8); Gorman, 2005; [Fry, 2006](#_ENREF_26); Crandall, et al., 2007; Dann & Haddow, 2007; Elijah & Neil, 2007; MacKinnon, 2007; 2009; [Weber & Jia, 2007](#_ENREF_87); [Palfrey, 2008](#_ENREF_65); King, Pan & Roberts, 2013). Deans (2004, p.129) pointed out that the Internet service providers and users have been encouraged to conduct self-censorship and self-regulation in China since the mid-1990s. Crandall, et al. (2007) supported Deans’ viewpoint in their study of the Great ‘Firewall’ of China (GFC). The result of their study suggested that the GFC's keyword filtering worked as a ‘panopticon’ to promote self-censorship. Regarding the influence of censorship in China, MacKinnon (2007, p.33) argued that the world view of the average Chinese Internet user was skewed by ‘China’s system of Internet censorship, control, and propaganda’, ‘in the regime’s favour’. Fry (2006) has blamed the censorship of the Chinese government for dragging the major Internet search engine companies – Google, America Online, Microsoft and Yahoo – into a moral dilemma in which they have to choose between commercial profits and social responsibility. There are a limited number of scholars (Gorman, 2005) supporting censorship in China. Bell (2000) and Gorman (2005) argued that the Internet, as well as other media, is subject to censorship in some form or another in most societies and different societies have different standards of what is considered acceptable.

In addition to surveillance and control, the Chinese government takes an active part in generating and leading content in favour of its regime. One example is the Government Online Project that started on 22 January 1999. By the end of 2009, there were 45 thousand government websites established in China including those of 75 departments of the central government, 32 provincial governments, 333 city governments and above 80% of the county governments (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2010). Government websites provide services like Revenue Bureau Audit services and National Tourist Bureau Electronic reservation services, and information like Labour Ministry Employment information collection and publication and the Labour Bureau Enterprise database (Lu, et al., 2002). Despite its large scale, however, Zhang (2002) argued that the Government Online Project in general is still ‘in its infancy and has a long way to go before it can claim to be ‘serving the people’’ (Zhang, 2002).

Despite the efforts made by the government to manage the potential so-called ‘negative’ consequences of the Internet, there are factors working in the favour of long-term evolution rather than revolution. The need for information driven by the free market and integration with the world, the rise of a new middle class with knowledge, property, and ‘expectations that may not always conform to those of the ruling authorities’ (Hwang & Schneider, 2011, p. 30) as a result of the advancement of the private and knowledge economy, the expansion of higher education, the increased awareness of rights and sense of inequality promoted by the high penetration rate of media such as TV and the free flow of labour force, and the interplay of the central and local governments which underpins the gradual social and political changes that are happening in China.

The Internet works as a catalyst. It is enabling the development of ‘civil society’ and public discourse around policy that could result in a gradual evolution towards democracy; the ability of Internet users to collaborate freely with one another through various online social networking forms might be laying the long-term groundwork for successful political activities, even while sensitive topics are blocked and offline protest activities are prohibited or effectively managed. [Chase and Mulvenon (2002](#_ENREF_1)) supported the argument. They suggested that the Internet would be ‘a key pillar of China’s slower, evolutionary path toward increased pluralisation and possibly even nascent democratisation’ (p.90) instead of bringing ‘revolutionary’ political change to China. Moreover, the number of Internet users is increasing rapidly to be more representative of the Chinese population and the virtual space for civil discourse is quietly deepening. If this civil discourse in Chinese cyberspace continues to mature, deepen and develop, that leads to a number of intriguing questions. Over the course of a generation, will a new group of Chinese emerge who have grown up debating public affairs, engaging in critical thinking and respecting the sanctity of the individual in ways that were not possible before? Will this new generation who have grown up using blogs and other forms of online participatory media be better equipped for reasoned self-governance than the current generation (MacKinnon, 2008)?

In addition, the Internet should not be seen as a mere technology or platform. It is a product of the Internet industry workers including the designers, the managers, and so on who are members of Chinese society. They are not passive followers of the government regulations or restrictions, but active agencies who ‘contribute to the production of alternative online spaces’ for the Chinese people within their ‘problematic working conditions’ in a hope to alter China (Xia & Kennedy, 2014, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014, p.176).

However, there is never a want of scholars who argue against the Internet’s potential to promote those changes. Morozov (2011) and Schlaeger (2013) suggest that information and communication technologies reinforce the current power relation and legitimise the current regime instead of undermining it (see Chapter 2, 2.4). Instead of being employed for activism, the Internet is too often used for vigilantism (Leibold, 2011; Sullivan, 2013), nationalism (Hughes, 2002; Kalathil, 2003; Herold, 2009; Weiss, 2014), chauvinism (Hu, 2011), etc. The human-flesh search engines (renrou sousuo yingqing 人肉搜索引, online vigilantism) all too often ‘result in petty, ill informed and harassing witch-hunts based on innuendos, half-truths and bizarre conspiracy theories’ (Leibold, 2011, p.10). Sullivan (2013) also believes that ‘human flesh searches raise the spectre of Cultural Revolution-era vigilantism’ (p.10). The Internet is also a hotbed for nationalism due to both the tactics employed by the CPC (Hughes, 2002; Kalathil, 2003; Weiss, 2014) (see Chapter 4, 4.5.2) and ‘a latent nationalism and traditionalism in Chinese culture’ (Herold, 2009).

The Chinese government played a very important role in promoting the development of the Internet in China as a part of the strategy to boost economic growth. The Internet contributed much to the fiscal revenue of the government and the economic growth. At the same time, the Chinese government employed a sophisticated system of strategies and measures to control the negative impact of the Internet. However, maintaining the balance between Internet development and political control has proved a challenging task for the Chinese government, because ‘the features of the Internet that cause problems’ for the Chinese government are ‘the same features that make the technology’ ‘a key to development, prosperity, and influence’ (Taubman, 1998, pp. 255-6).

# Chapter 3: Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to elaborate the research process and methodological approach used in the collection and analysis of data. It consists of four parts, a presentation of the overall epistemological approach and research design, a brief introduction of the population, the specific research techniques employed, and approach to data analysis. The chapter commences with a presentation of the overall epistemological approach and research design. This section demonstrates why grounded theory is chosen as the methodological approach and goes deeply into the philosophical issues including both the ontological and the epistemological positions that inform the theoretical perspective of the research and the theoretical perspective that lies behind the author’s methodological choice. And then it identifies and justifies the research population and its selection. Thirdly, the chapter elaborates on the concrete techniques of sampling and data collection via in-depth interviews, use of focus group research, online search and analysis of reported websites and web content, digital auto-ethnography, and literature review. Finally the chapter outlines the analytical approach used to interpret and analyse the data.

## 3.2 Grounded theory

Grounded theory methods aim to construct substantive theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves rather than deducing testable hypotheses from existing theories through systematic, yet flexible qualitative data collecting and analysing strategies that follow the logic of qualitative research (Charmaz, 2006a; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Strauss and Corbin, 1994; Stern, 1994; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Charmaz, 2003; Draucker, et al., 2007). The emergence of grounded theory is regarded by some scholars as a milestone in the history of qualitative research methods. It is ‘revolutionary’ (Coyne, 1997) in that it first explicates the systematisation and rigor of qualitative research and its ability to generate new theories in order to verify qualitative research in its own logic instead of following quantitative verifications (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Drawn from the works of Glaser and Strauss (Strauss, 1987; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Charmaz, 2006b), Charmaz summarised the seven defining components of grounded theory practice, which are ‘simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis’, ‘constructing analytic codes and categories from data’, ‘using the constant comparative method’, gradually and constantly ‘advancing theory development’, ‘memo-writing’, theoretical sampling, and post-analysis literature reviewing (Charmaz, 2006a, pp.5-6). Not only should a sound qualitative research using grounded theory follow systematic and rigorous procedures, the theories constructed should also fit closely with the data, be useful, conceptually dense, durable over time, modifiable, and contain explanatory power (Charmaz, 2006a, p.6) (see also Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992; Glaser, 1978).

Rich data forms the foundation of grounded theory. ‘A finished grounded theory explains the studied process in new theoretical terms, explicates the properties of the theoretical categories, and often demonstrates the causes and conditions under which the process emerges and varies, and delineates its consequences’ (Charmaz, 2006a, pp.7-8) . Grounded theory, therefore, serves well the goal of the research (see Chapter 1, 1.1).

Lying behind Glaser, Strauss, and Corbin’s grounded theory is positivism (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Strauss and Corbin, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978). Later, grounded theory has been utilised by a growing number of scholars to serve their research in different ways (e.g. Charmaz, 1990). Grounded theory guidelines concentrate on ‘the steps of the research process’ rather than the concrete techniques or the theoretical perspectives. Although systematic, grounded theory is quite flexible and can be adopted and adapted to conduct diverse studies (Charmaz, 2006a). What lies behind this research is an interpretivist theoretical perspective informed by realism and social constructivism.

Philosophical issues are of great significance to the justification of research. Thomas Kuhn (1922-96) believed that there was no theory-free and value-free neutrality. What comprises the theory includes what Kuhn called ‘a paradigm’ which ‘legitimates the methodology and methods’. The paradigm a researcher invokes is ‘a unitary package of beliefs’ he or she holds ‘about science and scientific knowledge’, ‘an overarching conceptual construct, a particular way in which he or she makes sense of the world or some segment of the world’ (Crotty, 1998, pp.34-35). That is the ontology, the epistemology and the theoretical perspective that lie behind a researcher’s research design. Later, Smith and Burton expressed the same concern. Smith (2000) used ‘paradigm’ to distinguish science from non-science. According to him, the fundamental difference is that to make scientific discoveries, scientists have a set of philosophical assumptions that govern their choices of methods. Burton (2000) claimed a direct relationship between ‘philosophical assumptions about human nature and how society is conceptualised’ and ‘the nature and status of data that is collected and the validity of the methods by which data is analysed, interpreted and understood’ (p.1). The notion of paradigm indicates that scientific research needs scientific research methods as well as ontological and epistemological assumptions that inform the research design.

As innovative research promises to produce new knowledge, all research begins with what is defined as knowledge and how knowledge is acquired. The first question what is knowledge or ‘what to know’ deals with ‘the nature of existence’ and with ‘the structure of reality’ (Crotty, 1998, p.10), that is ontology, while the second question looks into ‘how we know what we know’, the epistemological position a researcher takes. This research holds a realist ontological stance and a social constructivist epistemological stance. A realist view of realities perceives realities as existing ‘independently of our consciousness’ (Crotty, 1998, p.10). The author sees Internet use of university students in China as reality asserted by a realist ontological notion. The author believes that reality exists outside the mind, but meaning does not, a social constructivist position which claims that meaning is ‘constructed’ and it ‘comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world’ (Crotty, 1998, p.9).

The theoretical perspective refers to ‘the philosophical stance lying behind methodology’, or the assumptions buried within methodology (Crotty, 1998, p.66). The research invokes an interpretivist approach to understanding and explaining the studied phenomena. An interpretivist approach stands in contradistinction to a positivist approach which ‘seeks to identify universal features of humanhood, society and history that offer explanation and hence control and predictability’, and it ‘looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world’ (Crotty, 1998, p.66). The research attempts to generate new themes that are contextualised in Chinese society.

## 3.3 Research design

This section details the specific techniques employed to collect and analyse data and to generate new themes. The methods of collecting data determine the quality of the data, and thus the quality and credibility of a research project. Collecting data marks the start of fieldwork and the data lay the foundation for research using grounded theory. Charmaz (2006a) believed that ‘the depth and scope of the data make a difference’ (p.18). The richness, substantiality, and relevance of the data makes a piece of research outstanding (Charmaz, 2006a). What kind of data will research have? Not only does the mode of data collection impact on the quality, but also the depth, and scope of the data. Charmaz (2006a) suggested that ‘how you collect data affects which phenomena you will see, how, where and when you will view them, and what sense you will make of them’ (p.15). The design of data collection begins with the question of what constitutes data for the research. For this thesis the research consists of three categories of data: participants’ detailed narratives of their online experience and interpretations; information about online content the participants encounter and the Internet applications they use; and the researcher’s memos. The first category of data was collected by six in-depth interviews and one focus group; the second and third categories were collected by searching and analysing web content that participants reported, and the researcher’s own digital ethnography.

It is worth noting that for grounded theory, collecting the three categories of data simultaneously is involved. Data collecting and analysis are also simultaneous and shaped and reshaped throughout the research. Collection of the first category data is the main thread that sews together collection of the other two categories of data and analysis. Therefore, the demonstration of the research process follows the main thread (see Figure 1 for detailed demonstration).

## 3.4 The population: university students

The project focuses on a very specific group of the Chinese population, current home university students who constitute a crucial part of the Internet users in China, some of whom will eventually play important roles in Chinese society in the future since the purpose of higher education in China at this stage is to prepare high-skilled personnel and future leaders ([Tsang, 2000](#_ENREF_2)). As Yee claimed, ‘a systematic study of contemporary Chinese university students’ political culture will cast some light on China’s future political development’ ([Yee, 1999](#_ENREF_16), preface). The researcher argues that a systematic study of their online activity will help to better understand the long-term political implications of the Internet in China.

James Fallows, a national correspondent for The Atlantic and the former chief White House speechwriter for Jimmy Carter, focused his initial efforts on understanding college students when he started to study Chinese Internet users. He explained that:

Their age group is more technologically savvy, they are in the midst of an important period of growth that will impact the rest of their lives, they will soon likely have significantly more purchasing power, they are more likely to be exposed to/be engaged in the international world, and, of course, they're a key part of China's future. Other groups matter, but this was a start that I felt could have maximum value.[[39]](#footnote-39)

### 3.4.1 Student protest and social movements in Modern China

University students have played a leading role in protests and social movements in the history of modern China. The May Fourth Movement from 1915 to 1921 is one of the most important social movements in modern China aiming at transforming feudal China into a Western democracy (Tan, 2004). Students, especially those from tertiary institutions, were the enlighteners, leaders, organisers and the main force of the Movement (Lee, 2009). Before the May Fourth demonstration, there was public lecturing of students (Lee, 2009, p.36). It was intended to ‘enhance the knowledge of the commoners and awaken their self-consciousness’ (Schwarcz, 1986, p.86). On June 4 1919, more than 2000 students participated in the public lecturing activities (Lee, 2009, p.37). The educative function of the May Fourth Movement should not be underestimated, even if it failed in transforming China into a democratic state (Tan, 2004). Moreover, students organised large-scale demonstrations and rallies to educate the public, encourage patriotic thinking, and mobilise commoners to participate in political actions (Lee, 2009).

Another example is the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. Mason (1994) observed that college students served as the ‘instigators’ of these demonstrations. He stated that ‘the post-Mao era has been marked by student-led unrest in 1976, 1978, and 1986-1987’ (Mason, 1994, p.401). ‘The leaders and the initial participants in the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square were college students, mainly from Beijing University’ and demonstrations in other 84 cities ‘involved students from over six hundred institutions of higher learning’ ([Mason, 1994](#_ENREF_1), p.404). Chamberlain (1993) also considered the students to be the ‘core demonstrators’ of the 1989 protest. University students also play active role in the various nationalist protests both online and offline in China (Qiu, 2003; Weiss, 2014).

### 3.4.2 University students and Internet use

University students constitute a very important proportion of Internet users in China and Internet use is extremely popular among them (CNNIC, 1997-2013; Hong, et al., 2007). Gender difference was evident in whether respondents had ever used the Internet, the frequency of Internet use, the time spent per session and choice of Internet activities (Hong, et al., 2007). There was no distinct gender difference in having web friends or having met web friends. Grade (freshman, sophomore, junior and senior) was another important predictor of Internet use (Hong, et al., 2007). There was an increase in Internet use with years in college. Compared with students of other grades, seniors showed stronger interest in pragmatic use of the Internet like email and information-oriented use such as searching information and far less interest in entertainment-oriented use like watching sports and playing games.

There are a number of problems or issues that have been associated with Internet use, principally Internet addiction, pornography and Internet games. Gender difference is significant in all three aspects. In their study, Hong, et al. (2007) used two questions to assess the addiction aspects of Internet use (“often or always feel the need for more time to satisfy” and “often or always feel anxious if cannot access Internet for a while”).

Gender and grade were considered important factors when participants were chosen based on the above literature review.

In total, twelve students from three universities in Chongqing, in the southwest of China, participated in the in-depth interviews and the focus group. University students in Chongqing have been chosen to avoid potential biases that studies of Beijing and Shanghai introduce, because university students in a metropolis at a regional level are more representative of the population than those in Beijing or Shanghai. For example, in his study, Cockain (2014, p.53, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014) chooses students studying at Shanghai Normal University as his informants. His informants demonstrate much more curiosity for uncensored truth and desirability to access it through fanqiang (climbing over the Great Wall) than average Internet users in China (Guo, 2007) and my participants (see Table 57).

## 3.5 Data collection

### 3.5.1 In-depth interviews

Six in-depth interviews were conducted and the participants were recruited from three universities in Chongqing, in the southwest of China. An interview is, in essence, ‘a directed conversation’ (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; 1984). The nature of an in-depth interview ‘fosters eliciting each participant’s interpretation of his or her experience’, permits ‘an in-depth exploration of a particular topic or experience’, and, thus, is ‘a useful method for interpretive inquiry’ ([Charmaz, 2006a](#_ENREF_13), p.19).

Compared with several other techniques, in-depth interview is the best way for data collection of the study. Techniques like survey and experiment follow the direction pre-set by the researcher, and run the risk of imposing the researcher’s views upon the participants. A survey without interaction misses the chance to further explore new points emerging from the participants’ answers, and ‘the flat form of the written words loses the emotional overtones and nuances of the spoken text’ ([Bazeley, 2007](#_ENREF_2), p.44). An experiment studies only the chosen variable or variables defined by the researcher. On the contrary, the semi-structured and open-ended in-depth interview gives the participants more space to describe their experience and voice their views, and, thus, allows the researcher to explore the phenomenon in question from their perspective. Moreover, a survey is good at answering the question of how widely a certain assumption applies, and exploring the correlation between two or more factors, but it does not do well in explaining how it works. An experiment tests if the studied variable or variables work, but not how or why. A focused in-depth interview can generate rich and detailed data that help to better understand and explain the process.

Qualitative data collecting techniques like focus groups, in-depth interviews, group observation and ethnography are all good at producing data for interpretive inquiry to construct fresh concepts, categories and theories free from the influence of existing ones. In-depth interviews provide not only the data about participants’ behaviours but also about their understanding and interpretation of their behaviours. Moreover, the interview is interactive. The researcher can gain in-depth knowledge, insight of subjectivities, and unforeseen information through such an interactive relationship and generate new concepts and interpretations that best explain the participants’ behaviours and, in this case, the reality in China.

The following details the research design of the in-depth interviews. Six one-on-one face-to-face semi-structured open-ended in-depth interviews were conducted in a university consulting room or a university cafe compartment, cosy and quiet, with participants theoretically sampled (see *Sampling and analysing* in the latter part of this section) from three universities in Chongqing. Due to the open nature of the questions, the lengths of the interviews varied greatly from 35 minutes to 142 minutes. On average they lasted 83 minutes.

***The number of participants***

‘Less is more’ is considered the first principle of selecting participants for in-depth interviews (McCracken, 1988, p.17). What matters to the qualitative interview[[40]](#footnote-40) is not ‘how many and what kinds of people held these categories and assumptions’, but the categories and assumptions themselves. The qualitative interview concentrates on the depth, not the breadth of a research question. Therefore, it is more important to work longer, and with greater care, with a few people than more superficially with many of them (Patton, 1990; Marshall, 1996; Bazeley, 2007). The number of participants should range within 15 ± 10 (Kvale, 1996). The appropriateness of the sample size for a qualitative study depends on how adequately the data collected answered the research question ([Marshall, 1996](#_ENREF_51)). ‘Saturation’ is often used as the criterion to judge if the number of participants is adequate (Marshal, 1996; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Bazeley, 2007). In grounded theory, saturation means that the data collected is sufficient to define clearly the categories and the properties of the categories emerging from the data and to support the assumptions ([Bazeley, 2007](#_ENREF_2)). For the project, six in-depth interviews produced a satisfactory amount of data.

***The length of the interview***

The lengths of the six interviews were respectively 142 minutes, 57 minutes, 60 minutes, 35 minutes, 89 minutes and 110 minutes. The length of the interview for this project refers to the length of the recording. Three reasons contribute to the relatively long length of interviews. Firstly, the research is exploratory. Little, if any, research has been done in this area, using grounded theory. It took a longer time to explore than expected, and a substantial amount of information emerged in the course of the interviews which necessitated further exploration. Secondly, it is the nature of in-depth interviews to generate rich, full and detailed data. Thirdly, the researcher built a rapport with all her participants.

***The interview guide***

The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended. An interview guide is used to insure that the interview covers the main topics that the researcher would like to cover ([King and Horrocks, 2010](#_ENREF_47)). However, the guide is flexible. The phrasing and the order of the questions may change to fit into the conversation and to allow the participant to ‘lead the interaction [in an] unanticipated direction’ ([King and Horrocks, 2010](#_ENREF_11), p.35). At the same time, the in-depth interview, unlike the survey, favours open-ended and non-leading questions ([King and Horrocks, 2010](#_ENREF_47)), which allows the participants to articulate their personal experience in their own words and minimises the bias of the researcher and the interviewer. In general, the interview guide lists the topics and the themes the project focuses on, but the questions should not lead the participants to specific opinions about these themes ([Kvale and Flick, 2007](#_ENREF_50)). The interview guide consists of four parts: the introduction, opening questions, key questions, and closing questions (see Appendix I).

The purpose of the introduction is to introduce to the participant the researcher, the project, the interview, the ethics issues and his/her rights, and to make an initial effort to build rapport between the participant and the researcher. A major part was to read and explain the Informed Consent Form (ICF, see Appendix II) and gain consent from the participant. In order to build rapport, after the introductory stage, the researcher prepared about five minutes warm-up small talk about the participant’s hobbies and study for the participant to feel comfortable in the interview setting.

Opening questions consist of two parts: the demographic features and online skills of the participant (see Appendix I). This section helped to further build rapport and bridged from the introduction to the key questions that the research concentrates on. The first two parts were not audio-recorded, but the researcher filled in a form to document the data from opening questions.

The recording started with the key questions. The key questions focus on the participant’s online experience and their understanding of their online experience (see Appendix I). Every online activity and understanding of the participants was investigated in great detail in order to minimise the influence of existing literature and the bias of the researcher, as political implications of the Internet could exist in quite different ways.

Morrison’s (1998) understanding of the nature of media studies explains the political potential of every online activity. According to him, everything that concerns culture production is political, because ‘it involves a contest for definitions of the meanings by which we wish to live’ (Morrison, 1998, p.6). From this perspective, any online activity that involves generating meanings or shaping users’ world view can be political. There is little knowledge of how the participants see it. Instead of imposing the researcher’s view upon the participants, the interviews explored all the participants’ online activities, and the interviewer allowed the participants to lead the conversation and discuss the topic in their own words while the researcher collects the data from the participants. Due to the open nature of in-depth interviews, it is impossible to list all the questions asked during the interview until transcription is complete. Moreover, the questions were rephrased and reworded to fit into the conversation between the researcher and the participant. When analysing the data, the researcher takes a two-dimensional view. On the one hand, the post-analysis literature review (see Chapter 2) allows the researcher to check if the findings fall into the existing understanding of the political influence of the Internet or what counts as ‘politics’. On the other hand, data collected with a broad view of ‘politics’ enable the researcher to find new meanings of politics.

The purpose of further data collection is to gain specific information regarding emerging concepts, categories or theories, the interview questions, thus were refocused each time data analysis generated new concepts, categories or theories, or it was found that data were not sufficient to define emerged concepts or categories, or to confirm or disconfirm the theories ([Charmaz, 2006a](#_ENREF_16); [Glaser and Strauss, 1967](#_ENREF_33); [Draucker, et al., 2007](#_ENREF_23); [Marshall, 1996](#_ENREF_57)). Therefore the interview guide only lists the questions for the initial interview. The changes of the interview questions and foci and the rationale will be elaborated on in the later section.

The closing questions are designed for two purposes. One is reducing the rapport to reach a natural ‘fade out’ process so that the participant will not feel emotionally vulnerable or be left with painful memories ([Hennink, et al., 2011](#_ENREF_41)). The other is inviting the participant to reflect on the questions and his/her answers in order to gain full data for the research. At the closing stage, the researcher asked the participant to retrospect to see if anything about the research topic was missed or if he/she had something to add or suggest. The researcher also asked if anything was kept from the researcher for privacy concerns or other reasons (see Appendix I).

***The instruments***

The conversation was recorded by two audio recorders, with the prior permission of the participant (see Appendix II). Electronic recording was used firstly to free the interviewer from detailed note-taking so that both the interviewer and the participant could concentrate on the flow of the conversation. Moreover, audio recording allows the researcher to catch every detail of the conversation, which is essential to small-sized in-depth interviews. Brief note-taking, however, was still utilised during the course of the conversation to catch important information for the later process of transcribing and analysing, and to develop further questions in the process of interviewing. Each recorded interview was transcribed by the researcher using NVivo 10 either right after the interview or on the second day after it was conducted for coding and analysing. All transcriptions were conducted by the interviewer to minimise mis-transcription of the conversation and also to further familiarise her with the data. The process helped the researcher to reflect on interview techniques and to prepare herself for the coding process. The researcher tried to keep the length of the time between the interview and its transcribing as short as possible to minimise the effect of memory distortion.

***The ethical issues***

The research involves some sensitive topics such as censorship and political influence and also personal and confidential information, for example using online pornography, or chatting with intimate friends or family members. Therefore, the participants were coded and remained anonymous in any data collected and the data were highly confidential and accessible to the researcher only. Anonymity allows the researcher to ‘actively protect the identity of research participants’ (King & Horrocks, 2010, p.117; Byrne, 2004) and encourages the participants to feel safer and more comfortable to share with the interviewer as much as possible about their online experience and their understandings.

***Sampling and analysing***

A well-designedsampling procedure and recruitment strategy is crucial to the success of the in-depth interview due to the small size of the sample. ‘In qualitative research sample selection has a profound effect on the ultimate quality of the research’ (Coyne, 1996, p.623). Grounded theory is ‘a highly systematic research approach for collection and analysis of qualitative data’ (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986, p.3). It has its own way of sampling: theoretical sampling which has been described as ‘a hallmark’ (Draucker, et al., 2007, p.1137), a pivotal strategy ([Charmaz, 2000](#_ENREF_14)), or ‘a central tenet’ ([Coyne, 1997](#_ENREF_20), p.624) of grounded theory methodology. Theoretical sampling is a process of data collection directed by ‘developing categories in the emerging theory’, or by ‘evolving theory’, rather than ‘predetermined population dimensions’ or ‘variables’ ([Strauss, 1987](#_ENREF_75); [Becker, 1993](#_ENREF_4); [Draucker, et al., 2007](#_ENREF_23)).

Marshall (1996) explained why probability sampling for the quantitative approach was not appropriate for qualitative studies due to the small size of their samples and the complex nature of qualitative questions. The sample size was too small to avoid biases. Moreover, the prerequisites for a true random sampling which allowed generalisation included knowledge of ‘the characteristics under study of the whole population’ and the normal distribution of the research characteristics. However, the complexity and the exploratory nature of qualitative research makes it rare to know the characteristics that are relevant to the issue of interest in advance. In addition, the core elements of the project: participants' online experience and their understandings, cannot be expected to be normally distributed. Therefore, qualitative research requires sampling methods that serve its own purposes. It is important to bear in mind that qualitative sampling methods are appropriate because for qualitative research it is of greater importance to improve understanding of complex human issues than to generalise from the data ([Marshall, 1996](#_ENREF_28), p.524). It requires the sample be representative in terms of some characteristics of interest. ‘A theoretical sampling model’ (Kitzinger, 1995, p.300), i.e. to ‘work with theoretically chosen subgroups from the total population’ ([Morgan, 1988](#_ENREF_10), p.44), serves the purpose best.

Theoretical sampling is a complex form of sampling. Unlike most sampling methods for which the criteria are predetermined and which are an independent one-time conduct, theoretical sampling is ‘an on-going process’ since sample selection is led by emerging categories and theories (Becker, 1993, p.256). Moreover, the sampling process evolves simultaneously with data analysis and, for this project, with the collection of the other two categories of data. To clarify the procedures and the choices of the project’s sampling, the author draws a diagram to visualise the process (see Figure 1), and examples of the project are used to demonstrate how it works.

*Figure 1: The theoretical sampling guide*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Volunteer Sampling: Category I Data Category II Data Category III Data  Information about the web content & services  Researcher’s memo  Volunteered university student  Initial Recruitment  Indepth Interview |  |
|  | Open Coding  Web content & literature  Participant generated data set  Researcher’s memo  Significant/ frequent earlier codes |  |
|  | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Participant generated data set | Data from new participant | Web content & literature | Researcher’s memo |   Theoretical Sampling:  Focused Coding  Indepth Interview  Emerging categories |  |
|  | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Participant generated data set | Data from new participants | Web content & literature | Researcher’s memo |   Theoretical Sampling: Axial Coding  Indepth Interview  Saturated category & emerging categories |  |
|  | Theoretical Sampling:  Theoretical Coding   |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Confirming/Disconfirming case sampling |  |  |  |  |   Focus Group  Core categories |  |

Figure 1 demonstrates the simultaneous process of sampling, data collecting, and data analysing from initial recruitment of in-depth interview participants to the production of core categories. Strategies changed at different stages of the study to serve different purposes and the changing situation at each stage. Initial recruitment of three participants was conducted at Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications by handing out leaflets of invitation to interview (see Appendix III). Fifty leaflets were distributed on the main road to the central canteen and three students volunteered to participate.

Sampling in the initial stage of a qualitative study follows two major rules: go to where the studied phenomenon occurs and go to the information rich ([Chenitz & Swanson, 1986](#_ENREF_19" \o "Chenitz, 1986 #7325); [Patton, 1990](#_ENREF_66); [Coyne, 1997](#_ENREF_20); [Draucker, et al., 2007](#_ENREF_23); [Glaser, 1978](#_ENREF_31); [Strauss and Corbin, 1990](#_ENREF_76); [Glaser, 1992](#_ENREF_32)). The author, therefore, decided to recruit her initial sample on a university campus. For the second rule, an information-rich participant for qualitative research is ‘articulate, reflective, and willing to share with the interviewer’ (Morse, 1991, p.127). The voluntary participants are believed to belong to the group of people who would maximise the possibilities of gaining maximum amount of data (Glaser, 1978; [Strauss & Corbin, 1990](#_ENREF_74)). A volunteering sampling strategy was employed and no reimbursements were promised to ensure that initial participants were those who were truly willing to talk about the research topic.

Interviewing techniques in the initial stage accord with the open coding phase of data analysis which aims to ‘uncover as many relevant categories as possible’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, cited in [Draucker, et al., 2007](#_ENREF_23), p.1138). Strauss (1987) identified three types of coding for grounded theory: open, axial, and selective coding. Charmaz (2006a) added one, focused coding, between open coding and axial coding. Open coding is the first phase of data analysis. It is the initial close, line-by-line or word-by-word examination of the data ([Charmaz, 2006a](#_ENREF_16); [Strauss, 1987](#_ENREF_75); [Draucker, et al., 2007](#_ENREF_23)). For the purpose of yielding maximum relevant concepts and categories on the research topic, the interview questions and the interviewer should remain as open and non-leading as possible. In the initial three interviews, the interviewer asked the participants to list all their online activities and probed into each online activity and their understandings in great detail, especially in the first interview which lasted 142 minutes.

***The Limitations***

There are, however, a few weak points of in-depth interviews that need to be cautiously addressed to minimise their effects. The first one is weak generalisation and strong contextualisation due to the small number of participants. It was not by qualitative methods, but only by quantitative ones that one could explore the breadth of the findings of qualitative research (McCracken, 1988). The researcher must be cautious when analysing qualitative data, looking for the patterns, categories and assumptions that the data is going to generate. Qualitative work cannot produce quantitative findings (McCracken, 1988). Moreover, appropriate communication between the interviewer and the participant is never an easy thing to achieve. The interactive relationship sometimes may result in the interviewer leading the conversation and influencing the interviewee’s answers. Finally, intensive preparatory work is required in order to control the tendency to self-representation, and to better decode the meanings produced by participants.

### 3.5.2 Focus group research

One focus group was conducted, with the researcher as the moderator in Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunication. Six participants were recruited from six different colleges by their tutors. The author pre-set the criteria based on analysis of data generated from in-depth interviews. The group discussion was situated in a meeting room at Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunication, and it lasted 101 minutes.

***The focus group, research questions and rationale***

Analysis of the six in-depth interviews has yielded saturated categories, but also left one research question un-intensively explored. None of the six interview participants talked much about the political, cultural or social influence of the Internet in mainland China, or that of their Internet use when the interviewer allowed them to lead the conversation and to talk about their understanding of their online activities in their own words. Therefore, further information was needed, first to validate the saturated categories, to examine the relationship between categories, and also to collect data about the participants’ understanding of the political, cultural and social influence of the Internet in mainland China and that of their Internet use.

For this reason, the researcher decided to employ a focus group for further data collection. The focus group was geared to explore the participants’ understanding about the Internet’s influence. Three reasons which contributed to the researcher’s decision to choose a focus group were, firstly, because of the exploratory nature of focus groups. Secondly, the focus group concentrates on a specific topic and provides deeper insight into it. Finally, its group dynamics generate richer data than single individual interviews do. The focus group is believed to be best used for exploratory research (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The meaning of ‘exploratory’ here is two fold ([Morgan, 1988](#_ENREF_4)). It means either that ‘the topic or study population has not been extensively studied’, or that well-studied topics have not being researched from the participants’ perspective (p.30).

The exploratory nature of the focus group serves well the methodological approach (see Chapter 3, 3.2) and the purpose of the research (see Chapter 1, 1.1). Instead of imposing the researcher’s view upon the participants, focus groups allow the participants to discuss the topic in their own words ([Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990](#_ENREF_74)), or in their natural vocabulary ([Morgan, 1988](#_ENREF_61)). It serves to obtain large amounts of rich data from the perspective of the participants and provide the researcher with unforeseen information ([Lippa, 2008](#_ENREF_55)), and thus new knowledge to understand the research topic.

The focus group is also called the group in-depth interview. Unlike other research methods, for example the survey, which always includes a number of questions and allows the participants relatively little time to answer a question, focus groups are ‘limited to a small number of issues’ ([Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990](#_ENREF_6), p.10). By focusing on one single topic, it gives a group of participants enough time to reflect on the topic and probe deeper into their thoughts so that it can generate data that are natural (free of the researcher’s imposition), rich and deep. Focus groups could be ‘a good way to observe the process of opinion formation’ on issues where ‘the participants don’t have a well-formed opinion’ ([Morgan, 1988](#_ENREF_2), p.28). As stated above, the influence of the Internet in China has not been much talked about in the previous six interviews, therefore, a focus group was chosen as the solution to bring a group of participants together to concentrate on a discussion on the topic.

Finally, the group dynamic is the most important reason for the decision to shift from in-depth interviews to a focus group. The group dynamic is explicitly a part of the method ([Kitzinger, 1995](#_ENREF_48)). The group dynamic generated by interaction among group members instead of between the interviewer and the interviewee is unique to group discussions. Merton, et al. (1956) listed three advantages brought about by group dynamics: 1) releasing of inhibitions by the active participation of less inhibited participants, 2) widening the range of response, and 3) activating forgotten or neglected details. It also, to a great extent, frees participants from the influence of the researcher and the moderator. It allows participants to react to each other and build their responses and opinions upon others ([Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990](#_ENREF_74)). According to Morgan (1988), ‘the interaction also leads to relatively spontaneous responses from participants as well as producing a fairly high level of participant involvement’ (p.18). Focus groups promoted ‘inter-subjectivity’ among participants so that participants could think deeper and broader about the investigated question and provide information that a single participant could not and the researcher thus could gain a view closer to that of the participants (Lippa, et al., 2008, p.44). Gaiser (2008) held the same opinion that ‘the dialogue and interaction between participants’ enables the researcher to ‘gain additional insights’.

The researcher gains a better picture of the differences among participants from focus groups than from individual interviews and was provided ‘with new keys to underlying, but fundamentally unobservable motivations’ by observing and analysing how participants challenge others and how they respond to such challenges, how they ask and answer questions, and how they agree and disagree with each other (Morgan, 1988, p.13). This is extremely useful for a grounded theory approach in which constant comparison in a search for similarities and differences is a key method of data analysis. Furthermore, the ‘attempts’ of the group members ‘to resolve differences and build consensus’ is ‘inherently limited to groups’ (p.29). In addition, ‘what participants experience during group discussion resembles the process of what a researcher does when trying to form a perception over an issue’ (p.28). It is a process of ‘forming and modifying schemas in the search for some ultimate resolution among different experiences and perceptions’ (p.28). Therefore, the focus group was chosen to collect data in the final phase of the research.

***The size of the focus group***

Researchers commonly agree that the proper size for focus groups ranges from four to twelve participants (Morgan, 1988; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Krueger & Casey, 2009). The group dynamics and the purpose of the research are two important determinants of the group size. A group must be big enough to avoid ‘a rather dull discussion’ ([Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990](#_ENREF_13), p.57) and to provide greater coverage than that of an individual interview ([Merton, et al., 1956](#_ENREF_60)), but ‘small enough to permit genuine discussion among all its members’ (Smith, 1954, in [Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990](#_ENREF_13), p.57) and to ensure adequate participation by at least most members, if not all. According to [Stewart and Shamdasani (1990](#_ENREF_13)), smaller groups tend to be dominated by one or two members and fewer than six participants usually results in dull discussions. Morgan (1988) and [Stewart and Shamdasani (1990](#_ENREF_13)) suggested that big groups were difficult for the moderator to control and led to more moderator involvement which was undesirable. The group size also ‘depends on whether or not the research needs relatively even contribution to the discussion from every participant’ (Morgan, 1988, p.43). If it aims at finding a solution for a problem, a bigger group is more efficient and likely to come out with a better solution. A smaller group is more desirable when its goal is to investigate participants’ view on the topic. Therefore, a small focus group with six participants was desirable for this project.

***The length of the group discussion***

The time for a focus group session varies greatly due to the topics, the structure, the incentives of the participants, the purpose of the research, etc. [Stewart and Shamdasani (1990](#_ENREF_13)) suggested one and a half to two and a half hours for a typical focus group session. Morgan’s (1988) advice is more specific. He proposed ‘one to two hours for two broadly stated topic questions for less structured groups and four to five for more structured groups’ (p.56). Taking into account that 1) one hour is inadequate for an exploratory topic, and that 2) the discussion is less structured with four broadly stated topic questions, a length of between one and half hour and two hours is desirable.

***Sampling and recruitment of participants***

The purpose of the focus group was to produce data for the final phase of analysis, theoretical coding, or what Draucher, et al. (2007) called ‘selective coding’. Theoretical coding demanded ‘discriminate sampling’ of gathered data for verification of the emerging theory and for further development of categories that have not been well saturated (Draucher, et al., 2007, p.1138). Theoretic coding aims at identification of core categories and plausible relationships among categories to integrate the theoretical framework (Strauss, 1987). Therefore, participants selected should represent the variations of categories discovered at the previous stages.

Analysis of interview data illustrates that using tools to climb over the Great Firewall and learning of English as a major had a significant impact on participants’ choice of online information source and the following criteria were used for sampling of participants. One English major, a non-English major who was a regular climber of the Great Wall, the programme named the Great Firewall the party-state utilises to block and filter the unwanted websites and content from the Chinese Internet, and a non-English major who once climbed over the Great Wall, were recruited. The other three criteria included gender, course and grade.

One reason to consider gender as a criterion is the gender difference found in political interest ([Bennett and Bennett, 1989](#_ENREF_5); [Verba, et al., 1997a](#_ENREF_83)), political participation ([Tong, 2003](#_ENREF_82)) and Internet use ([Ni, et al., 2009](#_ENREF_63)). Another reason is that group interaction is influenced by the composition of a group in terms of gender and consequently it affects the outcome of the discussion. Men and women interact differently in same-gender groups and in mix-gender groups ([Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990](#_ENREF_74)). Therefore, the researcher decided to have one mixed-gender group of three male and three female students.

Course difference is also expected. It has been proved that civic knowledge promotes political participation in the setting of the USA ([Galston, 2001](#_ENREF_28); 2004). The political system in China is different, but it is still expected that civic knowledge (or political knowledge) influences people’s views of politics and their political participation. The course division in China affects students’ civic knowledge. In China, course orientation begins from senior high school. There are two orientations: science and social science. They share modules. The main modules consist of Chinese language, mathematics, English language, history, politics, chemistry and physics. However, different weights are put on different modules. Social science students are required to attach greater importance to Chinese language, history, and politics, while science students are required to put heavier weight on mathematics, chemistry and physics. English language is emphasised by both courses. Science students take Chinese language, mathematics, English language, chemistry and physics examinations, while social science students take Chinese language, mathematics, English language, history, and politics examinations in their university entrance examination. Results from interview data analysis also showed the course difference in terms of information they read online. Therefore, three participants in science courses and three participants in social science courses were recruited. All three participants in science courses had studied the science course at senior high school level, while two social science course participants had studied the social science course at senior high school level, but one had studied the science course.

Level of education is another important criterion. Firstly, there are three macro-levels: undergraduate, master and PhD. And then there are micro-levels: grade one to four at undergraduate level, grade one to two or three at master level and grade one to three or more at PhD level. One thing the author assumes is a continuous mature effect at macro-level with their age and growing education. The education from undergraduate level to PhD level lasts from 9 to 12 years, and for some students, there are breaks of education between different levels, especially between master and PhD level. The age of university students ranges from about 18 to about 30 or more. The age gap thus is wide among university students at different levels. The theory of age stratification assumes the impact of aging and cohort succession upon a person’s political attitude, political view and ideology ([Mannheim K, 1952](#_ENREF_56); [Cain, 1964](#_ENREF_11); [Ryder, 1965](#_ENREF_72); [Riley and Foner, 1968](#_ENREF_70); [Foner, 1974](#_ENREF_25)). Empirical evidence also supports the assumption ([Glenn and Grimes, 1968](#_ENREF_34); [Agnello, 1973](#_ENREF_1)).

In addition to age, level of education has been found to have a positive impact on political participation ([Lake and Huckfeldt, 1998](#_ENREF_52)), because education provides an individual with the intellectual and cognitive skills, knowledge, and the human capital resources that make participation easier ([Becker, 1964](#_ENREF_3); [Downs, 1957](#_ENREF_22); [Rosenberg, 1988](#_ENREF_71); [Verba, et al., 1995](#_ENREF_85)). Not only does the indicator of education predict the participation rate among a population, but also education as an independent variable best explains variations in an individual’s ‘relative level of political activity within most populations’ ([Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980](#_ENREF_89)). ‘The positive relationship between education and political participation is one of the most reliable results in empirical social science’, as Lake and Huchfeldt stated (1998, p.567). Therefore, it is reasonable to make the assumption that level of education at the macro-level has a remarkable influence on participants’ use of the Internet for political purposes and their perceptions of their usage. However, as PhD students only accounted for a very small proportion of university students, 1.8%[[41]](#footnote-41) in 2011, and it is more appropriate to define them as earlier career professionals in research than as university students, PhD students were not considered for the research.

The author also assumes that there is an effect of grades at micro-level, because at different grades, students tend to have different orientations in their university life. The first grade is a time for exploration both socially and academically, a time to get to know about the new environment, to make new friends, and to understand university life and their courses. During the middle grades, students tend to have a more settled relationship with, and better understanding of, university life and focus on their course study. The final grade is future-oriented. Students are trying to find out what to do after their graduation, to continue education or to go to work, and concentrate on entrance examinations or job-hunting. The study of Hong, et al. ([2007](#_ENREF_42)) revealed a relationship between grades and Internet activities among college students (see 3.5.2 for details). The results demonstrate noticeable differentiation in the use of different Internet applications among students of different grades. Hence, the author expects that level of education at the micro-level also impacts on participants’ use of the Internet for political purposes and their perceptions of their usage.

It is worth noting that the grounded theory approach suggests a delayed literature review after independent analysis of the data. Literature review was used at different stages of sampling to recruit the participants, not to interpret the data. The criteria derived from literature were employed to bring more diverse participants into the discussion, thus, to generate richer data. The research will not and cannot test the findings of the literature.

Six participants were recruited and the tutors were asked to inform the potential participants of the content of the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix VI) and of the length of the discussion so that the participants could set aside enough time for it. Table 1 shows the information of the six participants for the focus group in terms of the criteria. They were coded as P (Participant) 07 to P12.

*Table 3. Features of focus group participants*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Gender | Age | Climb over the Great Wall | Course | Year of study | Catshs |
| P 07 | Female | 25 | Once-climber | MSC in computer science | 3 | Science |
| P 08 | Female | 19 | Non-climber | BA in mathematics &digital technology | 1 | Science |
| P 09 | Male | 23 | Regular climber | MA in law | 1 | Social science |
| P 10 | Male | 22 | Non-climber | BA in biological medicine engineering | 4 | Science |
| P 11 | Female | 21 | Non-climber | BA in broadcasting and television | 3 | Social science |
| P 12 | Male | 21 | Non-climber | BA in English | 2 | Science |

Notes: Catshs = Course at senior high school

***The structure of the discussion and questions and the role of the moderator***

The structure of the discussion and questions is a continuum from unstructured to structured, as is the role of the moderator from the domination of the moderator and the researcher to that of the participants. It is never a question of how much structure or imposition is better, but a question of how much better it serves the purpose of certain research. For focus groups, usually less-structured discussion, nondirective questions and participants’ domination is preferable because these types of focus groups better serve the purpose of exploring new areas, providing unforeseen information and investigating participants’ points of view.

However, there are limitations with non-directive questions and participant domination. For some topics, participants may never come to the issues that the research tries to address if questions are presented too broadly, because participants take those issues for granted or because they are not interested in them. This is true in the studied topic according to the previous six interviews. Therefore, the author decided to change the strategy, to start with general questions and then move on to more specific questions ([Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990](#_ENREF_74)) and to ask directly about their understanding of the influence of the Internet in China. For a one and half to two hour group discussion, four broad questions were thus designed. They are in turn:

1) Would you please list all your online activities and describe them in detail?

2) How do you think the Internet has been influencing the Chinese society?

3) How do you think the Internet has been influencing the political system in China?

4) How do you think the Internet has been influencing the culture in China?

For the first question, the participants were asked to list all their online activities in detail including, the frequency, time, place, Internet application and device they used for each activity.

The limitation of the participants’ domination is that it may result in one or two participants dominating the discussion. As the project attaches greater importance to what different participants think about the topic than reaching a consensus, it requires a relatively equal contribution from every participant. Therefore, a semi-structured design is preferable. The discussion consisted of three parts: an introduction of about ten minutes, a 25 minute opening question, and an 86 minute discussion. In the first 10 minutes, the moderator introduced the participants to the project, the ICF, the moderator and most importantly some commonalities of the group members, which helped the participants better understand the project and served to create a rapport for the discussion. At the same time, the moderator emphasised two things from the beginning of the focus group: 1) The researcher wants to know everyone’s views on the topic, so they are expected to contribute as much as possible. They are also expected to let the researcher know in what aspects they agree and disagree with other’s opinions. 2) They are encouraged to take the lead to restart the dialogue when the discussion comes to a halt. The introduction was not recorded as data, and thus not counted in the length of the discussion.

In the opening part, the participants were given two minutes to think about the first question, write their answers on a piece of paper and present their answers one by one in the order they were sitting. The participants were encouraged to jump in when they had something to add or something interesting or important to bring in. The participants were also encouraged to speak out when their understanding was the same as that which other participants had presented, in order to know the similarities and differences. The opening question asking for facts instead of attitudes or opinions is easy to answer ([Krueger and Casey, 2009](#_ENREF_49)). It thus made it easier for the participants to join the discussion. The third part was the most important part. The participants were given three minutes for each question to write down their answers and then presented their answers one by one every time in a different order. After the presentation, they were asked to discuss these questions further.

***The instruments***

The moderator plays a key role in facilitating group dynamics and thus is critical to the success of focus groups. The researcher took on the role of the moderator for the project. The limitation is that her knowledge and pre-assumptions tend to bias the discussion. Therefore, the moderator must be very cautious when asking questions and try to be as non-directive as possible when she has to jump into the conversation. The moderator should show respect to every participant, emphasise that the goal is to know what every one of them really thinks and feels, ease the atmosphere, and not judge the participants in order to bring the most out in the participants. Krueger and Casey (2009) claimed that ‘focus groups worked when participants feel comfortable, respected and free to give their opinion without being judged’ (p.4). The recording, note-taking, and transcribing process is the same as for the six in-depth interviews.

***The number of focus groups***

The number of focus groups needed for a project is decided by four factors: the nature of the topic, the purpose of the research ([Kitzinger, 1995](#_ENREF_48); [Marshall, 1996](#_ENREF_57)), the structure of the discussion and the homogeneity of the studied population with respect to the issue of interest. The number of focus groups depends on whether or not another focus group contributes to generating new information (Calder, 1977). The researcher can be sure that there are enough focus groups for the project when she can anticipate what is going to be said in the groups.

The number of focus groups is also determined by the purpose of the research and the structure of the discussion. Exploratory research or research simply aiming at gaining participants’ perspectives would probably take fewer groups than those of which the goal was ‘detailed content analysis with relatively unstructured groups’ (Morgan, 1988). Complex research questions require more groups than simple ones (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Another important factor is the homogeneity of the population with respect to the issue of interest. The general rule is that the more homogenous the population, the fewer groups are required and vice versa ([Morgan, 1988](#_ENREF_61)). At the same time, this rule has to be considered together with two other questions: whether or not the project explores the difference of different subgroups, and whether or not it is necessary to conduct separate focus groups because the difference of subgroups creates different group dynamics and produces different answers. The purpose of the focus groups in this project was to confirm or disconfirm what had been found in the previous interviews, and to explore the relationship between the saturated categories. After transcription of the focus group, theoretical coding was conducted to see if saturation point was reached.

***The ethical issue***

The ethical issueis of critical concern to this project as it involves some politically sensitive topics in China and it was carried out at a politically sensitive time. The focus group was conducted before the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China which was held in November, 2012. There was a transition of power from the fourth generation of leadership to the fifth. Fractions within the Party were in a critical period of competing for power. The incident of Wang Lijun and Bo Xilai drew international attention to China, especially to the transition of power. When the researcher consulted *The Times* on 14th June 2014, a key word search with “Wang Lijun” resulted in 102 articles and that with “Bo Xilai” 345 articles.

On the afternoon 6th February 2012, Wang Lijun, a vice mayor and a flamboyant former police chief of Chongqing, the fourth municipality directly under the Central Government and one of the biggest cities in China, fled alone into the US consulate in Chengdu, the nearest to Chongqing, and walked out at 23:35 the next day. Wang Lijun was sentenced to 15 years in prison for a series of crimes including defection, bribe-taking, abuse of power, and ‘bending the law for selfish ends’ on 18th September 2012 (*The Guardian*, 2012). The Wang Lijun Incident triggered the worst political scandal in two decades in China (*The Guardian*, 2012) and directly led to the fall of Bo Xilai, one of the top communist politicians.

Bo Xilai was then Chongqing’s Communist Party Secretary, the highest-ranking official at municipal level, and also had a seat on the Politburo Standing Committee with nine members, the top decision-making body in China. He is the son of Bo Yibo, one of the Eight Elders who are the former senior leaders of the CPC ‘headed by Deng Xiaoping’ and ‘held substantial power during the 1980s and 1990s even after they had retired’ (Ng, 2013, p.6). He ‘rose to nationwide prominence with an anti-mafia crusade’ led by Wang Lijun and ‘mass sing-alongs of communist anthems’ (Morillo, 2012). He had had the chance of promotion to the highest ranks of power in China before the Wang Lijun Incident (Morillo, 2012). Investigations into Wang Lijun revealed Bo’s bribery, embezzlement and abuse of power and Bo Xilai was ‘sentenced to life in prison for corruption and abuse of power’ on 22nd September 2013. Gu Kailai, Bo Xilai’s wife, was proved guilty of murdering Neil Heywood, a British business man and was given a death sentence with a two-year reprieve on 9th August 2012. At the same time, Bo Xilai is seen in many ways as the face of the Chinese New Left (Ng, 2013). ‘The Chinese New Left was shaped in the 1990s’ and today is ‘popularly associated with Mao revivalism and anticapitalist movements’ (p.21). Since the current Chinese system is a mix of neoliberalism and socialism and many leaders still remember ‘the pernicious excesses of the Cultural Revolution and its wave of uncontrollable popular attacks on innocent landowners and businesses’ (p.21), the New Left alarms those leaders and it has been blocked on the Chinese Internet. Bo Xilai mandated the mass sing-alongs of communist anthems, ‘transmitted quotes from Mao’s Little Red Book by text message to everyone in Chongqing, and erected statues of Mao throughout the city, in addition to reorienting the city’s economy around state-owned industries’ (p.21).

The Wang Lijun Incident happened just a few months before the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China which would officially announce the names of the fifth generation of leadership. Therefore, it is plausible to assume that the Wang Lijun Incident is much more than a scandal of two corrupt senior officials. At that moment, participants might have safety concerns about discussing such a politically sensitive topic with a group of people. To minimise the effect, participants were notified about the topic when they were recruited to make sure that they would be willing to talk about it. And the researcher opened her Renren space and QQ space to potential participants for them to find out more about the researcher and feel safe to participate. The participants were coded and remained anonymous in any data collected and the data were highly confidential and accessible by the researcher only.

***The Limitations***

There are four limitations to any focus group research and some unique to this project. They are poor generalisation, group dynamics, sample bias, and sensitive topic at a sensitive time. While it can generate rich first-hand data, the focus group is weak in generalisation and risky in self-representation, due to the small number of participants. Furthermore, any intrapersonal, interpersonal or environmental factors may have an impact on the group dynamics and result in different data ([Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990](#_ENREF_74)). It is impossible to take into consideration all these factors. The richer, deeper and broader range of data generated by the group dynamics is tricky. The researcher will never know how different what participants say in a group, and what they say in an individual interview, is, what their real thoughts are, or what causes the differences. For this project, the political sensitivity of the topic is very likely to prevent the researcher from reaching what the participants really think about the issue. To overcome it, the researcher needs to pay special attention to what the participants find sensitive during the discussion and when conducting the data analysing, and design questions that the participants may find easier to give their answers to. Measures were taken to dig deeper when noting that a participant was hesitant to say something, which included asking him or her to give reasons for his or her hesitation during the discussion or contacting him or her later. During the analysis phase, comparison was also made between what was said in the group and what was said in interviews.

However, the justification of the focus group follows its own logic. It is different from that of a quantitative research due to its primarily qualitative nature and its small sample size. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) put forward what they called ‘ecological validity’ as one way to validate the results of focus groups. They argued that participants’ responses were ecologically valid because there was ‘a minimum of artificiality of response’ and because participants could ‘qualify their responses or identify important contingencies associated with their answers’ (p.12). Gaiser (2008) proposed another two ways. One is to follow focus groups with interviews. The other is to provide ‘an opportunity for participants to review the findings’ (p.292). The two methods suggested by Gaiser were employed, only the interviews were put before the focus group.

### 3.5.3 Web content analysis, digital auto-ethnography, and literature review

For a better understanding and interpretation of participants’ reports of their Internet use and their understandings of their Internet use, the researcher searched online the content and websites the participants had reported, analysed some online content, experienced using some Internet services that the researcher had not utilised before, and reviewed literature relevant to the participants’ Internet use or the themes that emerged.

The researcher searched and studied online some content or websites that were unfamiliar to the researcher, for example, BBS of Youth Hotels Association China, a Chongqing-based online local bicycling forum, an online city community, three online IT communities in Chinese; etc. Moreover, the researcher also read and analysed the content of twelve Sina accounts the participants reported they followed and frequently read, and provided a report of what the researcher found about those accounts. Some content may be unfamiliar to the foreign readers of the thesis, but is of great importance to interpret the meaning of the findings, for example, the Xiaoyueyue Accident, the Wang Lijun Incident, the Wenzhou Train Crash, the case of Yao Jiaxin, My father is Li Gang, and so on. The researcher searched online news reports, encyclopaedia, and user-generated content on forums and in Weibo accounts about those events and provided brief introductions to them.

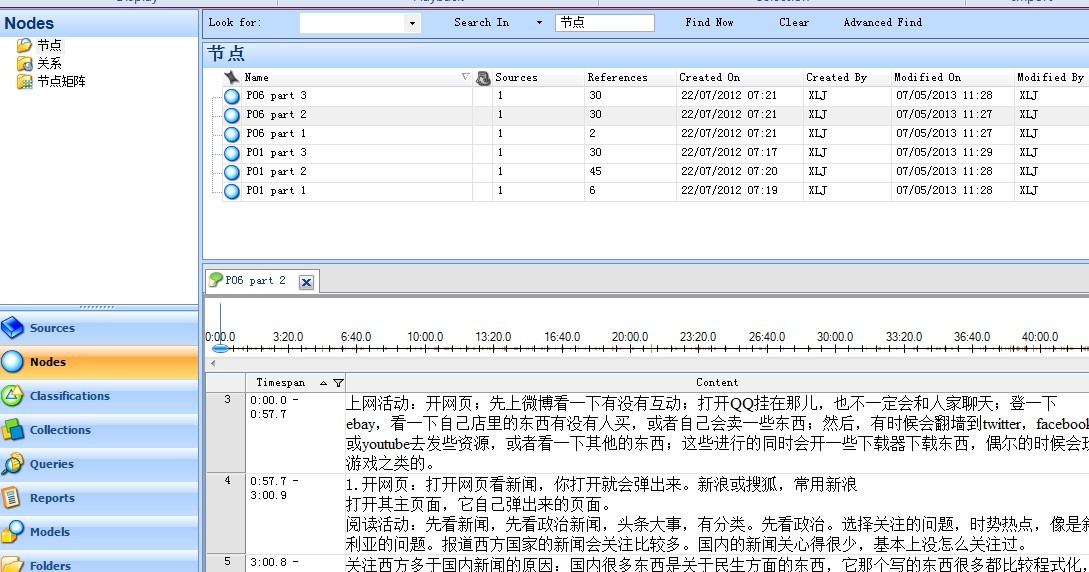
As a member of the Chinese society, an experienced user of the Chinese Internet and a research student who has studied the political influence of the Internet in China for about eight years, the researcher is a very important instrument for the study. The researcher has used some Internet services such as QQ, CNKI, university intranet and so on, for years and has a better understanding of participants’ accounts. Some were new to the researcher, for example, microblogging like Sina Weibo and Twitter, and social networking like Renren and Facebook. The researcher registered for those Internet services and experienced using them herself. The researcher also reviewed the studies of Internet services that the participants reported frequent use including Weibo, university intranet, Tencent QQ, Renren, search engines, online news, BBS, online forums or communities, online travelling, and online movies.

## 3.6 Data analysis

### 3.6.1 Four coding phrases

Coding was conducted using NVivo 10. There are worries about loss of closeness to the data due to ‘poor screen display, segmentation of text and loss of context’ ([Bazeley, 2007](#_ENREF_2), p.8) or loss of distance from the data when using software for data analysis ([Richards, 1998](#_ENREF_68); [Gilbert, 2002](#_ENREF_30)). Qualitative research needed both ‘closeness and distance: closeness for familiarity and appreciation of subtle differences’ to see from the insider’s perspective, but distance ‘for abstraction and synthesis’ to provide an outsider’s view – and ‘the ability to switch between the two’ (Bazeley, 2007, p.8). NVivo 10 ensures closeness, distance and an ease to switch between the two when needed for sophisticated analysis that characterises qualitative research (Bazeley, 2007).

*Figure 2: Demonstration of open coding using NVivo 10*



Navigation View

Timespan

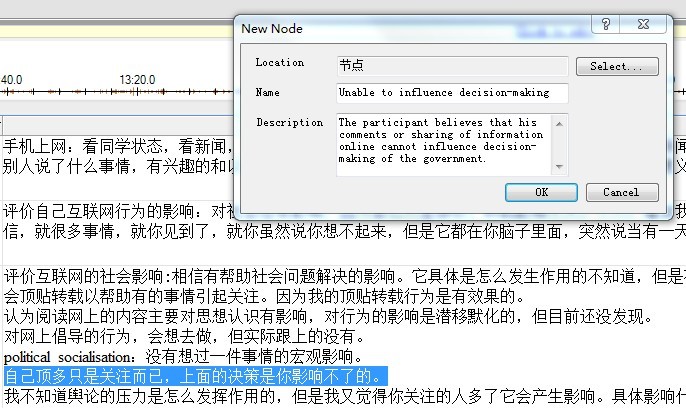
Detail View

List View

Recording

Figure 2 demonstrates how NVivo 10 is utilised at the open coding phase. Transcript is displayed in Detail view and Timespan shows the time span of the corresponding transcript in the recording, which allows the researcher to retrieve the original data easily when there is doubt about the transcript or when the researcher wants to recall some information that the plain text transcript cannot express. The researcher can code the text or the recording, if transcript is not needed, by simply selecting the text or the recording, right clicking the mouse, and then choosing ‘Code Selection At New Node’. An interface appears as Figure 3 shows. The researcher can then name and describe the code, click ‘OK’, and then the chosen text will be stored in a node under the name as a ‘Reference’. The established codes can be seen from List View (see Figure 2). New texts of the established codes can be coded into them as new references. A reference can be displayed in the Detail view by double clicking its name in the List view. The researcher can easily retrieve the context of the reference by double clicking it or by highlighting the code in the transcript.

*Figure 3: Demonstration of coding using NVivo 10*



***Open coding***

Methodologists ([Charmaz, 2006a](#_ENREF_16); [Strauss, 1987](#_ENREF_75); [Bazeley, 2007](#_ENREF_2)) suggested to use in vivo codes that are derived directly from the data at the open coding phase, which means naming a code with an actual expression of a participant instead of a sociologically or theoretically constructed code. For example, P01 said, “I am just showing my concern (online). You cannot influence the decision-making of the above (the government)” (see Figure 3). The two sentences were coded with the name of ‘Unable to influence decision-making’ as P01 expressed it. Significant codes like ‘Want to go bicycling when reading bicycling blogs’ and frequent codes like ‘Online shopping’ were generated. The first three volunteering participants were all male students. The researcher wanted to see if gender makes a difference on the research topic. Therefore, at the next stage, a female university student from Chongqing University was recruited. According to the findings of open coding, the interview has been refocused. Greater attention has been paid to the online activities that were conventionally considered not-that-political such as online shopping, sharing of the participant’s lifestyle content and so on.

***Focused coding***

Focused coding is the second major phase in data analysis, but it is the first step to move from specific data and participants’ expressions to more general, abstract, directed, selective, and conceptual categories or themes that have the capacity to encompass and explain larger segments of the data than single lines ([Charmaz, 2006a](#_ENREF_16); [2006b](#_ENREF_17)). This phase, as its name indicates, focuses on the most significant and frequent earlier codes ([Charmaz, 2006a](#_ENREF_16)). For example, in the selected text in Figure 4, P02 explained how he categorised his QQ friends. In the previous phase, the selected text was coded line by line into nodes named ‘Senior high schoolmates’, ‘University classmates’, ‘Family’, ‘CQUPT (Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications) girls’, ‘CQUPT boys’, and ‘New friends’ using P04’s own words. In the focused coding phase, the whole text was coded under an umbrella node labelled ‘QQ contact categories’.

*Figure 4: Demonstration of focused coding using NVivo 10*



***Axial coding***

As a result of focused coding, categories emerged from the data. The purpose of theoretical sampling and data analysis at the next stage is to collect data to specify the properties and dimensions of the emerged categories. This phase of data analysis is named by Strauss (1987) ‘axial coding’ by which he meant conducting ‘intense analysis around one category at a time in terms of paradigm items’ in order to build ‘a dense texture of relationships around the axis of a category’ (p.32). Similarly, both focused coding and axial coding are approaches used to sort and synthesise large amounts of data. Different from focused coding which is still text-based, axial coding aims at organising large amounts of data and reassembling them in new ways around categories. It is through relating categories to subcategories (Charmaz, 2006a) that one can achieve a clear definition of emerged categories. The ultimate product of axial coding is saturated categories. Therefore, Draucker, et al. (2007) suggested that ‘axial coding requires relational, or variational, sampling, in which data are gathered to uncover and validate the relationships among categories that have been discovered’ (p.1138).

Results from focused coding indicated that four participants were more similar than different in their online activities and their understanding of their online activities despite the fact that differences do exist. The enclosed Chinese Internet is blamed as the major shackle on the liberating power of the Internet in mainland China ([Lagervist, 2006](#_ENREF_51); [BOAS, 2004](#_ENREF_8); [Edelman, 2003](#_ENREF_24); [Fry, 2006](#_ENREF_26); [Gorman, 2005](#_ENREF_36); [Harwit and Clark, 2001](#_ENREF_40); [Jiang and Xu, 2009](#_ENREF_45); [Palfrey, 2008](#_ENREF_65); [Qiu, Winter 1999/2000](#_ENREF_67); [Weber and Jia, 2007](#_ENREF_87); [Zhang, 2002](#_ENREF_92)). To add variation to Internet use, the researcher decided to explore if using tools to climb over the Great Wall would make a difference. Two participants from Sichuan International Studies University, thus, were recruited through an associated professor at the University. They were P05, a female English undergraduate in her final (fourth) year who did not use any tool to access the filtered content online, and P06, a male English undergraduate in his first year who climbed over the Great Wall to access the filtered content online. The two interviews were also refocused to serve the purpose of data collection. All online activities of the two participants were intensively investigated, but special efforts were made to explore the online activities made possible because of their English skills and because of P06’s climbing over the Great Wall.

New data collected by interviewing P05 and P06 went through the process of open coding and focused coding to uncover new categories. And then category-centred axial coding was conducted to define emerged categories from the previous coding and to relate categories to subcategories. Saturated categories were yielded. The purpose of the next step was to generate saturated core categories. A focus group was conducted to serve the purpose.

***Theoretical coding***

Theoretical coding is a sophisticated level of coding that follows the codes selected during axial coding. The purpose of theoretical coding is to verify or to build theories. As one of the founders of grounded theory, Glaser (1978; 1992) has elaborated on what constitutes theoretical codes and how to find relationships between codes. According to him, theoretical codes conceptualise ‘how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to integrated into a theory’. Theoretical coding is the process of generating theoretical codes that specify relationships between categories that emerged from axial coding. Glaser ([1992](#_ENREF_32)) argues that theoretical codes and axial codes were different. Axial codes distinguish categories from categories, while theoretical codes ‘weave the fractured story back together’ ([Glaser, 1978](#_ENREF_31)). Theoretical codes served to tell coherent analytic stories (Charmaz, 2006a).

The final phase of data analysis consisted of three steps. In the first step, new data produced by the focus group went through the first three phases of coding to see if new categories would emerge. To ensure that the emerged categories were clearly defined and also to bring fresh insights into the research, the second step involved a team of four coders to discuss the definitions of the emerged categories, to code one or two transcripts of interviews independently, and to discuss again the clarity of the definitions and their insights about the research topic based on the data. The four coders were three third year PhD students in the Department of Journalism Studies and one first year PhD student in the Department of English at the University of Sheffield. The four coders were all Chinese and they coded from the Mandarin. Based on the discussion with the coders, memos, and checking the result of coder’s independent coding, the researcher refined some of the categories. In total, 3,408 references were yielded, and gathered under the emerged codes. With such rich data falling under a relatively small number of categories, the properties of forty-one categories are clearly defined. Then the researcher moved on to the next stage, theoretical coding, to relate the categories and subcategories to each other aiming to uncover participants’ patterns of Internet use, their understandings of their use patterns and their effects. Theoretical coding found the patterns of how an individual employs different Internet applications for different purposes to serve his or her needs and new interpretations of patterns of Internet use deemed non-democratising by the participants from their perspective (displayed and discussed in Chapters 4-6). Those findings are theoretically significant and innovative, and are based on and sufficiently supported by the data. Therefore, the saturation point of data collecting has been reached.

### 3.6.2 Emerged categories

In total, forty-one categories emerged at the focused coding phase and they fall into four broad categories, namely: the participant, Internet use, other media use, and participants’ perceptions of the Internet. The following three sections present a table of emerged categories, and findings concerning the participants and their other media use.

*Table 4. Categories emerged from the focused coding*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **The participant** | |
| Category | Definition |
| 1.Participant | Some demographic features of a participant including gender, course, year of study, the university, course division in senior high school and online skills, and how a participant described himself/herself in the interview or the focus group. |
| **Internet use** | |
| 2.Internet use habit | Where, with what device, when, how frequently, and how a participant used the Internet. |
| 3.Online activities | All online activities reported by the participant. |
| 4.Online news reading | Reading news online. |
| 5.Online information search | Searching for information online. |
| 6. QQ | Using QQ, an instant messaging software service developed by Tencent Holdings Limited, including all the services it provides such as private space for blogs, tweets, pictures; social games; music; shopping; microblogging; and group and voice chat. |
| 7.Online movies | Watching movies online. |
| 8. Renren | Using Renren, a Chinese counterpart of Facebook. |
| 9.Online shopping | Online shopping. |
| 10.Online forum | Using online forums |
| 11.Weibo (Microblog) | Using weibo which refers to the microblogging service in China. |
| 12.Online music | Searching for information, listening, sharing and commenting on music on the Internet. |
| 13. Online games | Playing games online. |
| 14. University Intranet | Using the university Intranet. |
| 15. Downloading | Downloading resources through the Internet. |
| 16.Online novels | Reading novels on the Internet |
| 17.Online travelling | Searching for information and arranging travelling online. |
| 18. Online participation | Participating in any activity or join any organisation online. |
| 19. Online lecture | Viewing lectures online. |
| 20. Climbing over the Great Wall | Using tools to reach Internet resources and services blocked by the Great Wall in China. |
| 21. Online literature | Reading literature works such as poems, prose and mini-novels online. |
| 22. Online magazines | Reading magazines online |
| 23.Online volunteering | Using the Internet to search for information about volunteering, join volunteering organisations, or participate in volunteering activities. |
| 24. Online political participation | Participating in any activity aiming to influence government policy outcomes or to promote or protect the interests of individuals and groups through the Internet. |
| 25. Email | Using email. |
| 26. Twitter | Using Twitter |
| 27.Facebook | Using Facebook |
| 28.Between acquaintances and strangers | This category focuses on how a participant used different Internet services for communication with acquaintances (who know each other in real life) and strangers (who do not know each other in real life), and for development of relationships (further development of relationship among real life acquaintances, from online strangers to online friends, and from online strangers to real life acquaintances), and the differences between communication among acquaintances and strangers. |
| 29.Participant as a communicator | What message a participant communicated through various Internet applications and what effect the participant expected. |
| 30.Civic talk | Online and offline conversation about messages received online the purpose or effect of which is to enlarge the participant’s perspectives, opinions, and understanding of something, or which involves the participant considering relevant facts from multiple points of view or critical thinking. It is different from entertainment conversation, which is to make participants in the conversation laugh or happy, and networking conversation, which is to network with participants in the conversation. |
| **Other media use and offline volunteering and participation** | |
| 31. Other media use | Using other media. |
| 32. Offline volunteering and participation | Searching for volunteering or participation information and doing voluntary work or participating through offline channels. |
| **Participants’ understandings** | |
| 33.Understanding of online comments and user-generated content | How a participant understands online comments and user-generated content. |
| 34.Disbelief in relevance of social problems | Participant’s belief that social problems exposed online do not affect their life, work, self-development, interests, or material gain. |
| 35.Understanding of censorship | How a participant understands the influence of censorship on him/her, what is censored, and the attitude of the participant towards censorship. |
| 36. Attitude toward government corruption | Participant’s understanding of and attitude towards government corruption in China. |
| 37.Belief of the Internet’s effect | Participant’s belief in how the Internet influences China, how he/she can have influence through the Internet, and how he/she is influenced. |
| 38.Understanding of political news | How a participant understands what they consider as political news. |
| 39. Understanding of current situation in China, the Chinese government, society and people. | How a participant understands the current situation, the Chinese government, society and people in mainland China. |
| 40. Comparison between English media and media in mainland China | How a participant understands the English media and the media in mainland China. |
| 41. Understanding of democratic countries or regions | How a participant understands democratic countries or regions. |

### 3.6.3 The participants

The concept of ‘participant’ encompasses three components: five demographic features, online skills, and how a participant described himself/herself in the interview or the focus group.

*Table 5. Who are the participants?*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Gender | Course | Yos | Uni | Catshs |
| P01 | Male | BA in telecommunication engineering | 3 | CQUPT | Science |
| P02 | Male | BA in electrical engineering and automation | 2 | CQUPT | Science |
| P03 | Male | BA in electrical engineering and automation | 2 | CQUPT | Science |
| P04 | Female | BA in finance | 4 | CQU | Science |
| P05 | Female | BA in English | 4 | SISU | Science |
| P06 | Male | BA in English | 1 | SISU | Social science |
| P07 | Female | MS in computer science | 3 | CQUPT | Science |
| P08 | Female | BA in mathematics &digital technology | 1 | CQUPT | Science |
| P09 | Male | MA in law | 1 | CQUPT | Social science |
| P10 | Male | BA in biological medicine engineering | 4 | CQUPT | Science |
| P11 | Female | BA in broadcasting and television | 3 | CQUPT | Social science |
| P12 | Male | BA in English | 2 | CQUPT | Science |

*Notes: Yos = Year of study; Catshs = Course at senior high school;* *CQUPT =* *Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications; CQU=* Chongqing University; *SISU=* *Sichuan International Studies University*

*Table 6. Online skills*

|  |
| --- |
| \_\_\_\_\_ Sent an attachment via e-mail =1 |
| \_\_\_\_\_ Downloaded a program from the Internet =2 |
| \_\_\_\_\_ Posted a file to the Internet =3 |
| \_\_\_\_\_ Designed a web page =4 |

*Table 7. Participants’ online skills?*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participants | P01 | P02 | P03 | P04 | P05 | P06 | P07 | P08 | P09 | P10 | P11 | P12 |
| Online skills | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |

Table 7 illustrates the online skills of the participants which were measured by the online skills scale (alpha = .75) created by Brian S. Krueger (2005). The scale consists of four items listed in Table 6. All twelve participants’ online skills were above average level and were at the same level.

*Table 8. How did the participants describe themselves?*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Self-description |
| P01 | Not used to speaking aloud or quarrelling with anyone”  “I get excited when speaking aloud and tears come out. I have not learned to speak aloud or quarrel because there was no quarrel in my family.”  “I do not want to be seen as a man who goes to extremes.” |
| P02 | “I love poetry very much.”  “I am cheerful. I would love to speak out about many things, very subjective (ideas), and then share with people my subjective ideas. I like to be with people and share with each other our status.” |
| P05 | “I was born in the rural area. It could be a disadvantage, but I do not think it’s a bad thing.”  “I signed a company in Guangzhou, which does motorcycle export business in Africa, South America and Southeast Asia. I’m afraid that the industry has been declining, but the business is new to the company and there is space for further development.”  “My degree dissertation is about *The Grapes of Wrath*. I focus on the pioneering, hardworking and humanity spirit of American people.” |
| P06 | “I incline to believe in the Western[[42]](#footnote-42) values.”  “If I cannot become famous by singing, and if education could change my life, I will choose to attain good education.” |
| P08 | Several years of learning piano |
| P09 | Loves history including both the ancient and modern history of China;  Major in media studies as an undergraduate  A sense of superiority (he thought that he was better-informed and more rational than most Chinese people.).  “You think that we could reason on the issue (the Arab Spring). But I think that not everybody in China does reason. Probably most people don’t. Their way of thinking is very simple.”  “The Internet broadens my sources of information.”  “I compare information from different sources.” |
| P11 | Claimed not to be interested in the topic of climbing over the Great Wall.  “I think that women are much less involved in political participation or discussion.” |

Some participants expressed opinions about themselves in their interviews or the focus group to explain their online behaviours. Table 8 demonstrates how the participants described themselves. For example, the interviewer asked P01, “has there been any occasion when you wanted to say something, but chose not to because of the fear of censorship?” He answered, “no. I did not find that there was times when I really wanted to say something. It has become a habit of mine to just read.” Then he explained that the factor that affected his online expression was not censorship but how people saw him. He reported that he did not want to be seen as ‘fringe’. Arguably, a political culture preferring unification of thought to diverse ideas (see Chapter 2) affected P01’s online behaviour. He felt that he was known as a moderate person who never went to extremes among those who knew him. He claimed, therefore, he would think over and he would not make extreme comments on the online platform on which the people who read his comments knew who he was. He gave an example of what he meant by extreme comments. He said, “for example, having read about a conflict between China and Japan, some people will comment, ‘start a war with Japan’. It is extreme and impossible.” Yet on a platform where his readers were strangers, he reported that occasionally he probably made some extreme comments. It indicates that anonymity of online environment freed P01 from the political culture to some degree.

When he explained why he made comments about news online, he attributed it to his character. Both P01 and P02 attributed their online behaviour more or exclusively to personality than to censorship.

P06 reported that he could make comparisons between Eastern and Western cultures, or between different ideologies, their ideologies or views of the world, or values to see which aspect most suited him by reading both domestic and foreign news reports. He claimed that he was inclined to believe in the Western values when asked. According to P06, the Internet became a source of alternative ideology. P09 reported that he loved history including both the ancient and modern history of China when he explained how the Internet helped him see things from different perspectives and precipitated him to think. He clearly showed a sense of superiority over most Chinese people. P11 claimed that she was not interested in the topic of climbing over the Great Wall after listening to P07 and P09’s experience and understanding of their climbing over the Great Wall. She also reported that she thought that women were much less involved in political participation or discussion.

To sum up, how the participants described themselves show that they tended to consider their online behaviour as personalised to meet their own needs, and think that their personality determined their online behaviour and how they were influenced by their online behaviour.

### 3.6.4 Other media use

*Table 9. Other media use*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Media | What for | Frequency |
| P02 | Television |  | Usually do not watch when on campus |
| P04 | Television | Half an hour of finance and economics news | If at home at noon |
| P09 | Not from the Internet | Information about Tunisian social changes |  |

Not surprisingly, participants are found to use the Internet as their major medium, if not the sole medium. The studied population are required to stay in university-provided dormitories which do not provide TV or any other mass media other than Internet access.

# Chapter 4: Participants’ Internet use

## 4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 addresses the first objective of the research to explore the lifeworld of the participants’ Internet use. It presents the findings concerning twelve participants’ Internet use and detailed research which has sought to reflect on the ‘impact’ of the Internet on Chinese society. It commences with a general description of their Internet use habits and online activities and follows with a detailed demonstration of participants’ every online activity. In each section, the researcher briefly introduces the Internet application in China, reviews previous literature on the impact of the Internet application, and reflects on how the findings of the study contribute to a better understanding of the research topic. Rich data paint a vivid picture of participants’ online lifeworld. Their articulations and perceptions provide detailed and nuanced empirical evidence to better understand conclusions and assumptions of previous research and also throw light on new ways to understand the role of the Internet in the process of democratisation in China.

## 4.2 Internet use habit and online activities

This section describes twelve participants’ Internet use in general. The concept ‘Internet use habit’ encompasses five components (see Table 10 and 11).

*Table 10. Interne use habit I*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Device | Place | Time | Frequency |
| P01 | His own laptop computer and occasionally other roommate’s computer | Dormitory | 8 hours a day, mainly in the evenings from 6pm to 12pm. | Every day, but away from the Internet when at home for the summer or winter vacations. |
| Mobile phone | Lecture theatre | 3 – 4 hours a day with intervals when not in his dormitory or when having lectures. | Every day. |
| P02 | His own laptop computer | Dormitory, not at home | About an hour a day, several minutes in the morning to check QQ messages and 10pm to 11pm. | Almost every day on weekdays, but not on weekends, not in vacations.  “It is better-planned than before. I would have got online whenever I wanted.” |
| Mobile phone | Toilet, lecture theatre | It depended. Mainly toilet time and breaks between lectures, adding up to nearly an hour. | Every day. |
| PC | Net-bar | two to three hours at a time. | twice or three times a month. |
| P03 | His own laptop computer | Dormitory | Occasionally in the mornings or afternoons with no lectures; with QQ online but sleeping at noon; and evenings before bedtime | Every day on weekdays, not on weekends when at home. |
| Mobile phone |  | Evenings before bedtime, when time is available during the daytime. |  |
| P04 | Her own personal computer | Her home | From 7:00pm to 11:30pm and some other small patches of time | Every day. |
| Mobile phone |  | It depended. | Very occasionally. |
| P05 | Her own personal computer | Usually dormitory | Time varied with the time that her study demanded. She had been busy with her study recently.  10:00pm -12:00pm weekdays  Evenings at the weekend.  When she was not busy,  afternoons and evenings at the weekend, sometimes one or two days | Every day. |
| Mobile phone |  |  | Every day. |
| P06 | His own laptop computer | Dormitory | One or two hours after 10:00pm | Every day. |
| Mobile phone | On bus or in toilet |  |  |
| P07 | Computer | Lab, dormitory | When in the lab or dormitory | Very frequently. |
| Mobile phone | Dormitory, bus, bus stop | Anytime or before bedtime. |
| P08 | Computer | Dormitory |  | Once every two days. |
| Mobile phone |  |  |  |
| P09 | Computer | Lab and dormitory |  | Every day. |
| Mobile phone |  |  |
| P10 | Computer |  |  | Very frequently. |
| Mobile phone |  |  |
| P11 | Computer |  | Whenever spare time was available. | Very frequently. |
| Mobile phone |  |  |  |
| P12 | Computer | Dormitory | When in the dormitory. | Very frequently. |
| Mobile phone |  | Whenever spare time was available. |  |

In most cases, computers were used when they were in their dormitories or laboratories. Their online activities were exposed to their peers since four to six students shared a room in their dormitories and about ten students or more shared a laboratory in the studied universities.

*Table 11. Internet use habit II*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Internet use with laptop or PC | Internet use with mobile phone |
| P01 | “My laptop is always online when I am in front of it. I might do nothing with it, but leave it stay online.” | Use for news reading, novel reading, viewing classmates’ statuses, communication, and information search; Use when having lectures. |
| P02 | QQ in the morning. Evenings began with surfing on the Internet connection service provider’s web. What followed varied.  Activities: QQ, surfing on the web, shopping, online chatting, movie watching, music listening  Internet use in the net-bar: Online games and surfing the Internet.  Reason for going to net-bars: “There are a lot of people in the net-bar.” | “The same with what I do with my laptop. Everything I do with my laptop except online paying.” |
| P03 | With QQ online but sleeping at noon; first activity is Qzone when going online. | Before bedtime for novel-reading; daytime for web-games. |
| P04 | Online activities in the order P04 did them: Weibo -> Renren -> QQ -> Taobao -> Online TV -> searching for information for questions or thesis writing -> group shopping -> uploading photoes  Weibo and online TV accounted for 30% of her time online. The rest was distributed to other activities randomly. | Searching for information with Baidu when there was something she could not understand during lectures; Weibo; finance and economics news; stock market |
| P05 | First log on to QQ, enter Qzone. It was hard to say about the rest, but QQ was the first step. | Baidu search, Qzone, news reading: Searching with Baidu when finding something incomprehensible; Viewing others’ status in Qzone to kill time; reading news. |
| P06 | Weibo, QQ, Ebay, Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, downloading, games;  Climbs over the Great Wall regularly. | Weibo, Taobao, mobile banking, news.  “I like to read those on mobile phone, news, and English. I tend to read them on mobile phone, because it is more convenient to read on a mobile phone’s smaller screen. Because if the news is long, the words are small, it is inconvenient to read a long one, while it would be more comfortable to read with mobile phone” |
| P07 | Online chatting, networking, online discussion, games, shopping, searching for information and resources for research;  Climbed over the Great Wall once. | Gets online anytime with mobile phone, views webpages or news with mobile on bed before bedtime. |
| P08 | Movie watching, music listening, shopping, online library, information search;  Watching videos using bitdownload of university intranet, searching data for study on university online library, shopping with Taobao and Jingdong, download piano scores from Springwind piano website, search information with Baidu.  “There was no fix website I used”;  No video or audio chat in dormitory. | Reading news with mobile, Sina news. |
| P09 | Chatting to keep connected (in touch); for information; entertainment (games, movies, songs);  Two categories: purposeful use, for example searching for information for thesis writing; and habitual use, everyday news reading.  Climbs over the Great Wall regularly. | |
| P10 | Games, news reading, QQ chat, viewing classmates’ statuses, shopping, music, information search (Baidu). | |
| P11 | Weibo, Renren, online magazines, watching movies, films and entertainment programmes, searching resources for study, Taobao.  Not interested in military; searching for needed resources. | |
| P12 | Novels, videos, listening to music while playing games, Renren, news, chat.  Excessive game playing before; more news reading recently; sometimes online chat together with roommates. | |

*Table 12. The participants’ online activities*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Online activities | P01 | P02 | P03 | P04 | P05 | P06 | P07 | P08 | P09 | P10 | P11 | P12 |
| Online news reading | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** |
| Online information search | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** |
| QQ | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** |
| Online movies | **√** | **√** |  | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** |
| Renren | **√** | **√** |  | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** |  | **√** | **√** |
| Online shopping |  | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** |  | **√** | **√** | **√** |
| Online forum | **√** | **√** | **√** |  | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** |  |  |  |
| Weibo (Microblog) | **√** | **√** | **√** | **√** |  | **√** |  |  | **√** |  | **√** |  |
| Online music | **√** | **√** |  |  |  | **√** |  | **√** | **√** | **√** |  | **√** |
| Online games |  | **√** | **√** |  | **√** |  | **√** |  | **√** | **√** |  | **√** |
| University Intranet | **√** | **√** | **√** |  | **√** |  |  | **√** | **√** |  |  |  |
| Downloading |  | **√** | **√** |  |  | **√** | **√** | **√** |  |  |  |  |
| Online novels | **√** | **√** | **√** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | **√** |
| Online travelling | **√** |  |  |  | **√** | **√** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Online participation | **√** |  |  |  | **√** | **√** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Online lecture | **√** | **√** |  |  | **√** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Climbing over the Great Wall |  |  |  |  |  | **√** | **√** |  | **√** |  |  |  |
| Online literature |  | **√** |  |  | **√** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Online magazines |  |  |  |  | **√** |  |  |  |  |  | **√** |  |
| Online volunteering | **√** |  |  |  | **√** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Online political participation |  |  |  |  |  | **√** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Email |  | **√** |  |  | **√** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Twitter |  |  |  |  |  | **√** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Facebook |  |  |  |  |  | **√** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Baidu tieba |  |  |  |  |  | **√** |  |  |  |  |  |  |

All participants were Internet users and they use both their computers, laptops in most cases, and mobile phones to access the Internet. The results demonstrate that the participants used the Internet mainly on campus and shared lots of commonalities in their habits of Internet use. However, the commonality stays at the surface or macro level, differences are found when details are explored.

## 4.3 Online news reading, information search, and lecture

### 4.3.1 Online news reading

Online news has always ranked within the top four most popular Internet services in China (CNNIC, 1997-2013). Moreover, ‘news is still the most frequently searched content’, and ‘news search ranks the first on both computers and mobile phones’ (CNNIC, 2013, p.61). However, Chinese Internet users spend less time on online news than on other online activities such as shopping and networking (e.g. Shen & Liang, 2014, p.68). Social and political news always ranks the last both in terms of visit frequency and duration regardless of cross-year differences compared with soft news including entertainment, sports, etc. and finance and economy news (Shen & Liang, 2014). Online news is an important battlefield for the State’s ideological propaganda. In 2000, The State Council Information Office established an Internet Propaganda Administrative Bureau, responsible for ‘guiding and coordinating’ web news content. Despite heavy censorship and brief news consumption, political and social implications of online news still attract media scholars’ attentions (e.g. Shen & Liang, 2014). A positive relationship between Internet news use, broadly termed as information use of the Internet, and political efficacy, political knowledge, and political participation has been found (Shen & Liang, 2014). Online news is believed to experience less strict control than traditional news (Lee, 1990; Zhao, 1998).

The researcher classifies online news service providers in China into four groups: Chinese government news portals referring to domestic news sites by Chinese government official media and traditional media, domestic commercial portals, Chinese foreign portals referring to the Chinese news websites provided in foreign countries, and English foreign portals which refer to the English news websites provided in foreign countries. Foreign portals in other languages are not considered in this research since they are too many of them, they are too diverse and they are not readable or understandable to the overwhelming majority of Chinese people. Moreover, the participants of the search did not mention any foreign portals in any language other than English.

Driven by both the political concerns and economic interests, Chinese government news portals have launched their online versions (Chan, et al. 2006). Like their commercial counterparts at home and abroad, their news websites are huge and contain various features. However, their news websites were found to be ‘in a primitive stage of development’ and there was not any significant difference between online newspapers and their print versions (Shen & Liang, 2014, p.62). Domestic commercial portals began to catch the attention of the public in the late 1990s and now there are numerous commercial portals. Among them, Sina, Sohu, Netease, and Tencent are the four most popular comprehensive commercial portals. Despite their rapid development and great popularity among Chinese Internet users, some scholars (e.g. Couldry, 2003; Couldry & Curran, 2003) argued that it was difficult to for commercial portals to develop truly alternative journalism in cyberspace in China due to political control. In addition to self-censorship, commercial portals in China are prohibited from direct news-gathering (Xu, 2003). They have no ‘interview rights’ and can only serve as ‘news aggregators’ instead of news agencies (Shen & Liang, 2014). Such a regulation disadvantages commercial portals in their competition with official news websites. As a result, it was argued that official news websites enjoyed ‘advantages in the amount of news, speed of updating news, self-reported news and perceived status’ (Chan, et al., 2006, p.930).

However, there are also scholars who believe that ‘fierce competition in the private sector has become a major force pushing the boundary of online news services in China’ (Shen & Liang, 2014, p.63). In order to capture a larger audience share, commercial portals take their advantage of user generated content and information synthesising capacity to provided audiences with different related stories or information and different perspectives and understandings. Moreover, they make most use of ‘grey areas’, for example small-scale social incidents. Thanks to their strategies to attract more audience, opinions and information on commercial portals are diverse compared with that of traditional media and official news websites. As a result, the most popular news portals are all commercial portals (Shen & Liang, 2014). In addition, it is also believed that the increasing popularity of microblogging and the interconnectivity of news portals and microblogs has increased audience’s chances of running into news ‘incidentally’.

Most English news websites are available online including BBC, Mail Online, VOA, CNN, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, and so on. They are blocked only at sensitive times or when they have sensitive news reports. There are also Chinese news websites provided by foreign countries available online, for example, stock.zaobao.com based in Singapore. However, there is little, if any, literature studying the use patterns or the influence of those news websites.

One important purpose of participants’ Internet use is to obtain information including news, information for study and research, and other needed information. News reading was common among the participants, but they differed greatly in terms of message, habit and channels.

*Table 13. News reading: channel and frequency*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Category | Ref | Channel | | Frequency |
| Single-source occasional online news readers | P07 | Mobile phone. | | Sometimes. |
| Dual-source frequent online news reader | P01 | QQ news[[43]](#footnote-43), QQ local news website[[44]](#footnote-44); *South Weekly*.  These two are the only news websites that the participant visits regularly. | | QQ: the news window appears when using QQ;  *South Weekly*: very often during a period of time, sometimes a semester long interval, now once every two or three days. |
|  | P03 | Xunkoo[[45]](#footnote-45), online community for universities provided by the Internet Service Provider, China Telecom; Sogou Browser main webpage provides links to news portals. | | Reads news after web-game playing. |
|  | P04 | QQ news; Sina Weibo. | | Every time when logged on QQ. |
|  | P08 | Mobile phone Sina news, Qzone. |  | Frequently. |
|  | P10 | NBA Chinese website, friends’ posts in their Qzones. | | Every day, frequently. |
| Multi-source frequent online news reader | P02 | Sina news[[46]](#footnote-46), Baidu news[[47]](#footnote-47), QQ news[[48]](#footnote-48), Taobao news, and People news[[49]](#footnote-49), occasionally online forums. | | Not every day; four out of five times, the participant would read news when surfing online. |
| P05 | *China Daily* (in both English and Chinese)  *Chongqing Mobile Newspaper* (a mobile phone newspaper targeting high school students. It has three visions: for junior, senior and professional high school students. P05 booked at the one for professional high school students). | | Every day. |
|  | Every day. |
|  | VOA & BBC’s official websites in China, Put English Listening Club[[50]](#footnote-50), | | It depends, two or three times a week recently. |
| P06 | CNN, Twitter, Facebook, ABC, Sina, Sohu, Sina Weibo. Twitter for earliest accounts about emergencies around the world.  Professional news websites like CNN for details, insightful editorials and comments; Sina and Sohu for everyday news; Sina Weibo for news and comments. Facebook for international news and for knowledge about foreign countries from his former classmates. | | Frequently. |
| P09 | Phoenix, QQ news (one of the four biggest portals), Sina news, foreign websites blocked by the Great Wall, micro-blog. | | Every day. |
| P11 | Usually QQ news, PPS[[51]](#footnote-51) news, also read Ifeng news[[52]](#footnote-52), New weekly[[53]](#footnote-53), New women[[54]](#footnote-54). | | Every time when logged on QQ |
| P12 | Ifeng; BBC, VOA. | | Had not read much about news before. |

Twelve participants are grouped into two categories in terms of frequency: frequent online news readers including all participants except P07, an occasional online news reader. In terms of the number of news sources, they are grouped into three categories: single-source readers; dual-source readers, and multi-source readers. All participants except P07 reported using more than one channel for news and half of the participants reported using more than two channels. The channels are grouped into four categories: Chinese commercial news portals including QQ news, PPS news, Sina, Sohu, Baidu news, Taobao news, Ifeng news or Phoenix, Put English Listening Club; Chinese government news portals including China Daily, Chongqing Mobile Newspaper, People news, Xunkoo, South Weekly, New weekly, New women; foreign news portals including BBC, VOA, CNN, ABC, NBA Chinese website, and other foreign websites accessed by climbing over the Great Wall; and social networking sites Twitter, Facebook, Sina Weibo, Qzone, and one forums. Chinese commercial new portals are the most frequent used and also used by all participants. Next is social networking sites and online forums. Chinese government news portals rank third. South Weekly, a news portal of a traditional medium affiliated to the government, however, has been described by The New York Times as “China's most influential liberal newspaper” (Rosenthal, 2002) as a result of commercialisation and deregulation (Donald et al., 2002). Foreign news portals are last and were used only by English majors and P09 who regularly climbed over the Great Wall.

The findings support the assumption that studying English as a major is an important factor that affects participants’ choice of English news websites as sources. Three English majors all utilised English websites or English mobile newspapers as their sources of news while none of the other participants claimed they did. However, those three also differed from each other. P06 utilised the English websites for information. P05 and P12 employed the English websites first for English learning and gained some information while learning English. The author argues that language becomes a barrier to exploring and enjoying the wealth of knowledge and information while the whole world is theoretically connected together by the Internet and everybody on the Internet can access information across borders.

Obviously, language is an obstacle that is not easy to tackle, but there is a barrier that is not so obvious. It is the recognition that the world is connected and the motivation to get connected to the world. We are affected by things geographically, culturally, and languagely remote from us (Zuckerman, 2014). Therefore, we need to get connected to the world instead of just the world around us. We need to be motivated enough to tackle the language barrier and the discomfort and conflict that diversity brings (Zuckerman, 2014) to embrace the diversity that inspires us. In China, every student is required to learn English from secondary school. English education actually starts from kindergarten or primary school in cities. The vast majority of universities in China require their undergraduates to pass the College English Test Level 4 and postgraduates CET 6 to be qualified for their degrees. Therefore, reading English news or materials is difficult for non-English majors in China but not insurmountable. What stops them from stepping into the English world is a lack of motivation to know and be connected to the world.

As to the question of whether or not the Internet provides equal opportunities to various individuals (see Chapter 2, 2.2.2), the findings tend to support a negative answer. With rich resources online, the Internet tends to advantage those whose abilities, skills, or beliefs serve them better in realising the theoretical potential of the Internet. Among those abilities, skills and beliefs, skill in English is one. An awareness of the potential of the Internet and the connectivity of an individual’s life to the world and thus a willingness to explore diversity and conflicting ideas is another.

*Table 14. Online news reading: reading habit*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Category | Ref | Reading habit |
| Random online news reader | P04 | Just to scan to have a rough idea: “It does not take much time. Just a glance at the headlines to have a rough idea. Only click into those I am interested in. It takes about ten minutes.”  “When I log on to QQ, there is a website. I just have a glance of what the news are today. Just a glance.”  “For example, the Xiaoyueyue Accident, I will read about it. I watched video to know what happened. I did not pay attention to people’s comments. Usually I just watch the video or photos to know what happened.”  “Just to have a rough idea, I will not try to gain in-depth knowledge about them.”  “I don’t think deep about it.” |
|  | P08 | Always reads on mobile phone |
| Semi-purposeful online news reader | P01 | **Interest-oriented news reading:** Reads what interests him, but has no clear interest or purpose.  **Path dependence:** Follows the path that the service provides, for example, reads the eye-catching top news, checks the columns one by one to find interesting reports, sometimes follows the links, and be attracted by pictures.  **Link dependence:** Follows the links to read relevant reports.  **Just to know:** the purpose of news reading is just to read and know, makes no efforts to remember, probably gives thought when reading, but not deep thought, forgets about what he read when he shuts the page down and could not recall much of what he read when having been given a long time to think. |
| P02 | **Path dependence:** Choses news websites from the website collection provided by various Internet browsers. Because Sina was listed the first, he reads Sina news the most.  He also reads news or information when some eye-catching titles pop up on logging into QQ or China Mobile fetion.  He paids no special attention to any section of news. He rolls down the web page and gets into those that catch his eye.  **Just to know:** Usually he just reads, but does not share or discuss what he reads with others. He does not comment on news website because it was troublesome to register to make comments. **Off-line conversation:** Sometimes he shares and discusses with his roommates face-to-face in their dormitory. |
|  | P03 | Reads news after web-game playing;  Just reads, no comments or sharing.  “If I have doubt about what I read on a website, I will check several websites and compare what they say”. |
|  |
|  |
|  | P05 | **Catch main information:** “Usually I will memorise the main information when reading.”  **Vocabulary learning:** “I will learn by heart the English word if I find it useful.”  **No purposeful search:** “I read what comes to me. Till now I am not at stage to read something in English and then search purposefully. Not yet at that stage.”  Think while reading: “If I come across such problems (food security, transportation safety and environment, etc.), I will think about them.”  Detailed reading with interested areas: I am interested in those areas (economics) so that I usually will read in detail if I come across them when listening.” |
|  | P10 | Special interest in NBA, friends’ posts in their Qzones |
|  | P11 | “I have habit. Every time when I log on QQ on my computer, news window will appear. I will read the news first and then other things” |
| Purposeful online news reader | P06 | Starts with political news:  “I first read political news, top issues. There are columns. I start with politics.  More about Western countries, less domestic news:  “The issues I choose to concern are hot current affairs like Syria. I care more about reports about Western countries while less about domestic news, hardly care about.”  Value news comments:  “I value the comments the news media make.” |
|  | P09 | Reads news every day at set time;  Compares news from different sources;  Analyses while reading. |
|  | P12 | IFeng for documentaries and VOA and BBC for English learning. |
| NA | P07 | On bed before bedtime with mobile phone. |

The Xiaoyueyue Accident: Wang Yue (Chinese: 王悦; pinyin: Wáng Yuè) was a two-year-old Chinese girl who was run over by two vehicles on the afternoon of 13 October 2011 in a narrow road in Foshan, Guangdong. As she lay bleeding on the road for more than seven minutes, at least 18 passers-by skirted around her body, ignoring her. She was eventually helped by a female rubbish scavenger and sent to a hospital for treatment, but succumbed to her injuries and died eight days later. The closed-circuit television recording of the incident was uploaded onto the Internet and quickly stirred widespread reaction in China and overseas. The accident was widely covered by English media such as the BBC (Yip, 2011), *The Guardian* (AP foreign, 2011), *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ, 2011), and *The Telegraph* (Moore, 2011a; 2011b).

The third index is whether or not the participants purposefully chose different news sources to meet their different needs. Those who always chose news sources purposefully are categorised into purposeful online news readers; those who sometimes chose news sources to meet their special needs are called semi-purposeful online news readers; and those who read from news resources that came to them while using other Internet service and just follow the path the websites set without purposeful searching are called random online news readers.

*Table 15. Online news reading: what do I read?*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Message |
| P01 | **What the participant read:**  **Social and political news**: news about people’s welfare and society, reports about the decline of Detroit, hot issues, governmental corruption, news about Chongqing (where the university is located) and Fujian (his home town) most of which are critical of the current situation, political news like the Wang Lijun Incident, more domestic news, international relationships;  **Soft news:** car pictures, sometimes technology;  **Facts vs. comments:** more reports than commentaries (but searches for commentaries when reading news reports), reads readers’ comments when reading news on mobile phone;  **What the participant almost never reads:**  **Soft news:** entertainment and sports;  **Social and political news**: military;  **Finance and economy news:** economy. |
| P02 | **Soft news:**  **Identity relevant news:** “Scan the contents, some will catch my eyes, for example, relevant to me, for example about university students. That will catch my eyes. For example, university students consumption ideas. What we concern now is some people buy mobile phones, iphones. Read the title. Most news (I choose) are relevant to me or to my identity. News about my home city.”.  Entertainment  Some academic news, for example, inventions around the world, essays, and science and technology.  **Social and political news**:  Current politics. “And I concern those about social instability, not social instability, but the problems that the people cared the most. I read information about current affairs and news. What happened around, example, mine accidents, factory accidents. Occasionally top news of current politics, example, what China invented, launch of Chang’E No.? And I also concern about top national affairs and political affairs”.  “Village government corruption news on forums: read very occasionally, do not concern about it. I concern news on major news portals.”.  **Facts vs. comments: “**Read the facts only. I will also read their comments.”. |
| P03 | **Soft news:** What happens in universities cooperating with China Telecom, for example events; sometimes sports; occasionally entertainment;  **Social and political news**: Usually military news; read about Xiaoyueyue, but without details. |
| P04 | **Soft news:** Entertainment;  **Finance and economy news:** finance & economics and stock market;  **Social and political news**: top news of national and international affairs. |
| P05 | **What she read:** Pretty much everything.  **Social and political news**: international, national affairs, politics.  **What interests her:** international politics, for example, elections, who is visiting China, or wars; Wars: Iran and Syria.  **Finance and economy news:** economics (exchange rate, The NASDAQ, Dow Jones).  **What interests her:** Economics: “For example, I always care about exchange rate, and China’s rising status in World Bank.”  **Soft news:** life and technology, a little in entertainment, life tips to be healthy; job and career; |
| **What she did not read:**  Not interested;  Too professional to understand: for example, finance, interested but incomprehensible. |
| P06 | **Social and political news**: News comments of professional news websites; hot current affairs like Syria; From Sina Weibo: more domestic political news; CNN: politics, some political comments, such as the motivation of North Korea’s ceasing of nuclear test, impact of the earthquake on Japan, or the democratic transition in the Middle East countries; CNN, ABC on Twitter: first hand news. |
| P07 | Never heard of Tunisian revolution or Iranian Green Revolution |
| P08 | **Social and political news**: Social issues; never heard of Tunisian revolution or Iranian Green Revolution |
| P09 | **Social and political news**: News and comments, politically sensitive information: e.g. Tunisian and Iranian revolutions; government online hearing of suggestions of amendment to the Criminal Procedure Law and the Civil Procedure Law from the public. |
| P10 | Never heard of Tunisian revolution or Iranian Green Revolution;  **Social and political news**: Watched political satires online. The content of satires was against the Party and Western culture.  News and comments: e.g. what happened in Syria and Lebanon;  News and comments on the current situation in and outside the country, new policies of our leaders, problems and situation in the Middle East and Western countries |
| P11 | What is new or big every day.  Never heard of Tunisian revolution or Iranian Green Revolution. |
| P12 | **Social and political news**: News about wars, rebellions, politics such as new policies and documentaries.  Never heard of Tunisian revolution or Iranian Green Revolution.  English words. |

The research adopted the three categories Shen and Liang (2014) employed in their study. They are soft news, social and political news, and finance and economy news. Each category encompasses sub-categories. Soft news is composed of entertainment, sports, health, and information technology; social and political news consists of society, military, and politics; finance and economy news includes finance and economy, business, and real estate. Every participant read social and political news online except for P07 who did not talk much about her online news reading and P11 reported she read what was new or big every day. Five out of six participants of in-depth interviews reported consumption of soft news of one kind or another. In contrast, not a single participant in the focus group reported consumption of soft news. This is mainly because the focus group concentrated on the question of how Internet use affected them as individuals and society instead the details of participants’ Internet use. At the same time, social desirability also played a part. Finance and economy news has not been found common among the participants. There were only two participants, P04 who was an undergraduate in finance and P05 who was about to graduate and found a job in the area of foreign trade, having reported reading finance and economy news.

What has been found in this study is different from what Shen and Liang (2014) found through analysing web browsing data of 600 panel members from Shanghai. They found that soft news ranked first in terms of the visit frequency while finance and economy news ranked first in terms of the duration of visit. According to their findings, social and political news ranked last in terms of both frequency and duration of visit. The demographic features of the two different studied groups, the university students and the big city Internet users, social desirability and different ways of data collecting might explain part of the variance.

It is important to note a special finding from the focus group. All other participants including P07, the one-time-climber, admitted that they had never heard about the Tunisian revolution or Iran’s Green Revolution, when P09, who climbed over the Great Wall regularly, raised the issue. P10 mentioned that he learned about problems and situations in the Middle East and Western countries, but he did not admit that he knew about the Tunisian revolution or Iran’s Green Revolution. P06, the other regular climber, also mentioned that he learned about the democratic transition in the Middle Eastern countries (see also Table 16). Information about the Tunisian revolution, Iran’s Green Revolution, and the Arab Spring, is banned in China (Ng, 2013). However, it is plausible to assume that there are channels other than climbing over the Great Wall on the Internet to learn about the information, because P09 reported that he had not learned about it from the Internet but from other channels. The findings suggest that censorship does affect Internet users’ knowledge of political issues. The findings also suggest that those who climb over the Great Wall are more likely to access other sources of politically sensitive content other than that on the Internet than those who do not climb over. However, there is no clear causal relationship between climbing over the Great Wall and having access to other sources of politically sensitive content.

*Table 16. Online news reading: how do I understand news?*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Understanding of news |
| P01 | **Facts vs. aspects: “**sometimes doubts, but believes most of news reports on news websites, domestic news are all facts, domestic news on the bad sides are almost all facts, but on the good sides exaggerates a bit, sometimes the reports are not so explicit because of some reasons” vs. “news reports tell the truth, but not the whole truth, only one aspect of the truth, the emotional colour is different when reporting form different aspects”;  Domestic vs. foreign: “Domestic news are all facts, news on foreign countries shows more the bad sides, probably sometimes beautifies reports on domestic situation, the situation in foreign countries seems unstable or in bad order.”  Belief in one’s own judgment: “there are more extreme comments, does not think that foreign countries are as unstable as reports say because news focuses on dramatic happenings, news reports affect some personal decisions, for example, will investigate when making decision on whether or not work in the reported unstable countries, stick to believe in his own opinion.” |
| P02 | **Credibility:** “As to the credibility of online information, everybody has their own opinions. In my view, I will read with a little bit doubt. But for current affairs, I can only see what news says as facts because I do not know it at all.”  **News portals vs. online forums:** “In my view, credibility (of major new portals) is relatively high. As to information on forums, I seldom read them, and just to have a rough idea of what it says when reading. That is it. I do not even bother to think about it.”  **Government opinion leading:** “The government will certainly lead (the online news report). It has its directions. But it cannot deviate from the facts. Good is good, bad is bad. It cannot totally deny it.” |
| P03 | **Facts vs. comments:** “I read facts.”  **General trust:** “If I have doubt about what I read on a website, I will check several websites and compare what they say. As to news, actually they are roughly the same, which makes me trust them more.” |
| P04 | **Credibility:** “I think that generally I trust online news very much.”  **Fact vs. comment:** “Probably more factual reports. Usually I do not concern about others’ comments, just to know what happened. That is it.” |
| P05 | **For Iran and Syria:** “Just know there are such issues.”  **Wang Lijun:** having no clue.  “It reminds me of the Wang Lijun Incident which seems hot. I have no clue, no clue. I have not searched information for it and just know a little. I come across it last night. I cannot recall where I found it. I just clicked in. It was 163 mail. …there were lots of different statements. I cannot figure it out. I heard from people and there were comments online. I mainly listened to others. What I read online yesterday was just facts without comments. It was a government website I went into through 163. The report is fact-based. Anyway it was a political website reporting that he asked for leave from the National People's Congress and the Chinese Political Consultative Conference(NPC&CPPCC). I have not searched information through other channels because I was busy with a topic. I probably would have searched usually.”  **Two train crashes:** “I feel a bit sad, a bit indignant, and together a bit funny, three in one.”  **Understanding of domestic situation portrayed by domestic news:** “The image of China portrayed by domestic media is harmonious nationwide. However, in general, the over-all situation in China, I think, can be described as harmonious. To us, to live in such a situation is not bad, as well and good. Well (something) cannot be changed. Anyway, in whichever country, USA or other countries, there must be some conflicts. There are some conflicts in China. That is Tibet.” |
|
|
| P06 | **Western and Eastern media are both one-sided:**  “In fact, to many things the opinions of Western and Eastern are different, but their comments are both one-sided or something. Both domestic and foreign media are one-sided. I need to synthesize them, for example, nuclear test in North Korea and issues in Syria. On one side, you can see that the opposition factions in Syria demand democracy and the president’s stepping down from power. You can also see that there must be benefit for the authoritarian regime in China since China supports the president in power. Since the president has been in power for many years without serious domestic oppositions or something, so I think that the president must have handed things well, or contributed to the country in certain ways and then the public are in some way content with his ruling. You can see the power of Western countries’ dissemination of ideology and cultural exports. They can influence a middle east country, an Arab country.”  **Difference between different media:**  “Sometime European media and American media vary in their opinions. European media are more conservative, while American media more radical. You can feel it, but hard to put it specific.” |
| P09 | Different stances result in different perspectives. |

P01, P02, P03 and P04 had a general trust in online news while P01, P02, and P03 reported only a little doubt about online news. P05’s accounts about her learning and understanding about the Wang Lijun Incident demonstrated that she felt it inappropriate to talk about such a sensitive topic. However, she tried to imply something by saying “I have no clue, no clue”. It also indicated that she did not feel obliged to be informed of such a big political scandal. She placed her immediate need, to finish a school assignment, prior to learning about the political news.

*Table 17. Online news reading: why do I read news?*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Motivation |
| P02 | **Social utility** (Self-development motivation): “News reading helps me to know the current social situation. For example, the most practical one is how to get a job after graduation. What kind of people does the society need? How should I think about what I will be in the future? What kind of people does the society cultivate? What kind of thoughts need you have? Most importantly, (to know) the political direction and tendency of the state, (you should) choose the direction that the state needs most.” |
| P03 | **Surveillance:** To know what happened in the outside world while in the university.  Wang Lijun accident: “It can be counted as a big issue. It has significant impact on society. All people will have their opinions, so they do not speak out what impact it brings.” |
| P04 | **Social utility:** National affairs: be normal  “You should have a rough idea of these things. It is abnormal if you do not know when others talk about them.”  Stock market: for her course  “Probably because I study it.” “It is not because of something. I think I should care about it then I care about it.”  **Surveillance:** Xiaoyueyue: Curiosity  “It was famous and attracted lots of attention. I had already known the Xiaoyueyue Accident. It had already out there for one or two days. But I had not watched the video and did not know the process. Later I found it on Weibo, just to know what happened and why everybody was talking about it.” |
| P05 | **Social utility:** “To broaden my scope of knowledge.”  “To increase my English vocabulary.”  “Of use to translation.” |
| “There is no reason. Sometime there is no reason to care about something. I feel like reading it, and then read it.” |
| P06 | Why news from different sources?  **Social utility:** “To know different aspects. There is difference among different media.”  Why news about Western countries?  **Social utility:** “I am studying English. It helps my study or other aspects to know more about Western culture.”  Why news like the Syrian issue?  **Social utility:** “I do not know. It allows me to see news reports at home and abroad to compare Western and Eastern cultures, or ideologies, or world views, or values so that I know what best suits me and I will choose news that stresses the values I choose.”  **Social utility:** To enrich myself:  “They (Western countries) can influence other countries with their ideology. It is an ability which is worthy of our learning and studying. So I like such things since I was a kid. Reading such news enriches me.” |
| P09 | **Surveillance:** Helps to know the outside world. |
| P10 | **Social utility:** To arrive at my own conclusions about the issue. |

Utility, surveillance, and diversion are suggested as three types of needs mostly related to news consumption (Shen & Liang, 2013). Utility is also called social utility. It includes reading news for the purposes of ‘having something to talk about with others’, ‘getting facts that support my ideas for when I am in a discussion with others’, ‘meeting the expectation from my parents, friends, or colleagues, and helping the development of my career or education. It is worth explaining here why ‘to know the political direction and tendency of the state and choose the direction that the state needs most’ is classified into ‘social utility’. The researcher argues that P02’s statement does not express any patriotic sentiment. Instead, P02 expressed the view that he took news reading as a way to know the current social situation in order to find a job after graduation. The meaning of the sentence must be interpreted in the context (see Table 17, P02). For P02 the purpose ‘to know the political direction and tendency of the state and choose the direction that the state needs most’ is to help the development of his career, not to serve the state.

Surveillance motivation includes reading news for the purposes of ‘keeping up with the most important things that happen in the world’, ‘staying informed about a range of topics, and ‘keeping up with what happens in my environment’ (Van Cauwenberge, D’Haenens, & Beentyes, 2010, p.342). Shen and Liang (2013) claimed that ‘surveillance motivation was the prime driving force for news information attention’ (p.64). Diversion encompasses three sub-categories: entertainment, pastime and escape. Entertainment motivation includes the needs or purposes of entertainment, relaxation and excitement. Pastime includes reading news to pass the time, or to read news ‘when I don’t have anything better to do’, or ‘when there is no one else to talk with or be with’. Escape includes reading news for the purposes of ‘escaping the daily problems’ or ‘forget work or study’. Social utility is the major motivation for the participants’ news consumption and surveillance ranks second. There was not any participant who reported diversion motivation for online news consumption.

### 4.3.2 Online information search

Search engines have been playing an increasingly important role as the volume of online content grows explosively. The proportion using search engines had increased dramatically since 2003 (Guo, et al., 2007). Search engines have increased the capacity of Internet users to know and communicate about social and public issues. Social news ranked third with 61.2% in the list of information searched on a search engine (Guo, et al., 2007). Ranked first is work or study with 73.6% and second entertainment or relaxation 69.2%.

Search engines are among the Internet services frequently concerned when discussing Internet censorship in China. Search engine companies store large quantities of data that can track individuals’ online activities. Such a capacity can be utilised by the government against its dissidents. In 2004, Shi Tao, a journalist who worked in the central city of Changsha, was arrested and sentenced to prison for ten years by the Chinese authorities and Yahoo! supplied the data that contributed to his conviction (Jenny, 2006). Moreover, popular search engines in China, like other popular Internet services, are responsible for censoring their search results as the state demands (Naduvath, 2009; MacKinnon, 2009). Despite being censored, ‘an overwhelming majority of Internet users are satisfied with search engines’ in China (Guo, et al, 2007, p.49). According to Xiao (2011), search engines like Baidu are among those Internet services that have given Internet users unprecedented capacity for communication (p.48).

The two most popular search engines in China are now Baidu and Google[[55]](#footnote-55) together with 88.5% market share (Su, 2014). Back in 2003, the Chinese search engine market was more evenly divided across four search engines: Google 24.0%, Sohu 23.3%, Sina 15.5% and Yahoo 13.7%. At that time, Baidu accounted for only 2.5% of the market share. However, the share of Baidu has dramatically increased within two years and reached 46.0% in 2005. The popularity of Baidu in China has continued to grow and finally it dominates the Chinese search engine market with about 80% of market share (Greenberg, Jie & Hardy, 2009; Amanda, 2013). It also becomes the world’s leading Chinese language search engine and ranks as the world’s fifth most popular web site (Alexa.com, 2014). The essence of Baidu’s business model is to ‘comingle paid search results with natural ones’ (Whatley, 2013, p. 230). Its marketing tactics involving ‘paid search ranking, site blocking, and paid removal of negative results’ are considered aggressive and sometimes even questionable (Whatley, 2013, p.230). Baidu was regarded as ‘the most vigorously self-censored Chinese search engine’ (Xiao, 2011, p.53; Deans & Miles, 2011). Censorship is believed to contribute to its dominance in the Chinese search engine market.

Google used to control the highest proportion of the Chinese search engine market. It did not only lose its market share in China, but has also come under criticism because of its compliance with the Chinese Government’s tough censorship laws in the USA (Jenny, 2006). After long negotiation with the Chinese authority, Google finally decided to close its China-based Internet search service and direct Chinese users to a Hong Kong-based uncensored version of its search engine due to the non-negotiability of self-censorship and Chinese hackers intrusions in 2010 (Helft & Barboza, 2010).

*Table 18. Online information search: channel and message*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Channel | Message |
| P01 | Baidu search engine;  Online MSC entrance examination forum. | News and commentaries;  Purpose-oriented information: forums on special subjects, information that helps decision-making. |
| P02 | The websites (major news portals, or web browsers) | News. |
| P03 |  | Music and games. |
| P04 | Baidu | What I do not know or understand during course lectures. |
| P05 | Baidu | Problems: illness, MP4 broken, etc.;  Job hunting, about the companies & volunteering work;  How to write a Party’s event report;  What interested me or puzzles me when reading or other sources. |
|  | Google, Google scholar | For academic information, literature. |
|  | University intranet: CNKI[[56]](#footnote-56), “another one I cannot remember” | For essay writing. |
|  | Wiki | For English information. |
| P06 | Google: more on computer than on mobile. |  |
| P07 | specialised websites and forums, and search engines including Baidu & Google | Research database, database in her field, unusual and newly-emerging issues in her research area. |
| P08 | University online library | Literature for mathematic model building |
|  | Baidu | further information about news. |
| P09 | CNKI | Literature for thesis writing. |
| Search engine | News and comments. |
| P10 | Baidu |  |
| P11 | Baidu: | “I like Baidu very much. It gathers various opinions and suggestions from many people.” |
| P12 | Baidu, Google |  |

There are three types of channels for information search: search engines, academic resources, and specialised forums. The channels are mainly utilised for news and study, and sometimes for daily problems and questions. The most frequently used channel is search engines, among which Baidu is the most popular and Google ranked the second. Search engines were used most frequently for news searching and sometimes for course study. What they searched for differed greatly from one to another to serve their own purposes and interests. Influence of their course and grade on the content they searched is evident.

*Table 19. Online information search: search habit*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Search habit | | | |
| How to search | When to search | What happens to search results | Search for political sensitive content |
| P01 | Key word search | Curiosity and interest: “It is because of curiosity, I probably search for something that I do not know, when someone mentions something interesting or something I do not know”;  For full understanding: when the message is too brief;  Factuality check: to check if the message shared by others is true; “I make my own judgment when reading and will search when what says does not agree with what I think.” | Content-focused: “usually I do not concern about the website the message is on. If it comes from another source, I might pay attention to the source. I just read the message, what happened and what others say.” | Censorship vs. motivation: Censorship does not affect his reading of online political sensitive content;  Lack of strong motivation: “I heard about 3rd of September Student Movements and searched online. I found that one could hardly find any information online and then gave up. When the Wang Lijun Incident happened, I was at home without the Internet. Then I forgot to search for information when I went back to my university and gained access to the Internet.” |
| P02 | Surf the websites | When heared from others chatting or discussions |  |  |
| P04 |  | “When I could not understand during course lectures” |  |  |
| P05 | Key word | When you have problems;  When you need to collect information about volunteer work;  When collect job information;  When read or hear something interesting or that you don’t know. | To find solution to problems: “You can try yourself.”  Do not care about the source:  “I do not care about the source, just choose what interests me.” | Wang Lijun: “Usually I would have searched.” “Just want to know by instinct.” |
|  | Key word |  |  |  |
| P06 | “Usually key words in Chinese, sometime key words in English when I know the English words.” | “When there is an incident or emergency and I want to know more about it, for example when the earthquake broke out in Japan.” |  |  |
| P07 | Check regularly specialised websites and forums.  Search with search engines | When encountering an unusual problem or when some questions emerge. |  |  |
| P08 |  |  | The university intranet and online library provided enough electronic resources for her study since she was a beginner in her field. |  |
|  |  | When needing to search for information, when searching for further information about news. |  |  |
| P09 |  | When some classmates mention what happened |  |  |
| P10 | Key word | When searching for information |  |  |
| P11 | Key word |  | To check if what I need is there. |  |
| P12 | Key word |  |  |  |

Search with key words is the most frequent way. Only P06 reported that he sometimes used key words in English when he knew the English words. The other way which is much less common is to surf the websites or to check regularly specialised websites and forums. Information search with key words is found to be puzzle-and-problem-solving oriented. Information search usually occurred when the participants learned about something they did not know from someone or a source without detail, or a problem emerged. Their search was oriented to gain further information to solve the puzzle or the problem. P01 also reported that he sometimes searched information to check if a message shared by others is true.

The Internet changes the way information is consumed. Compared with the traditional media, the Internet is user-oriented. When using a traditional media, a user follows the path that the medium sets, and it is difficult to gather together the information on a certain topic that interests a user. On the Internet, a user can theoretically reach all the information online through applications such as search engines, super links, social networking applications, news websites, and so on, at a time when he or she needs it. Therefore, the participants seemed to believe that instead of being passive receivers, they have positively and purposely sought the information they needed and made their own judgements. P08 reported that she would extensively search for information about the incident that interested her and got to understand it.

However, the information-search ability that the Internet enables and tools that the Internet provides to make the world’s information universally accessible are blamed for being only helpful in discovering ‘what we want to know’, but not powerful in helping us discover ‘what we might need to know’ (Zuckerman, 2014, p.11). The way information consumption and communication is ‘pre-selected and mediated by the individual user’, what Sunstein (2001, cited in Benny, 2014) calls the ‘Daily Me’, is also believed to reinforce and polarise political ideologies and communities by helping the individual users find what they want (Benny, 2014; Zuckerman, 2014). Moreover, it would be dangerous to assume that the search ability of the Internet serves only citizen users. In fact, there is abundance of evidence that it advantages the party-state much more than its citizens (Morozov, 2011). Through controlling what is displayed, what is not displayed, or where to display certain content in the list of search results, the party-state manipulates what conclusions the recipients will reach, while the Internet users strongly believe that it is they who draw the conclusions from their own judgement (see Tables 73, 75, 82, 84, & 86). The party-state does their best to manipulate the evidence and thus there is no need to mind ‘the public reaching their own conclusions independently’ (Morozov, 2011, p.131). In such a way, propaganda is made more concealed and more effective. P01’s accounts about how his searching of politically sensitive content failed (see Table 19, P01) demonstrate one way censorship works to stifle individual’s curiosity.

P01, P05 and P11 reported that they usually did not care about or pay attention to the sources of the searched results, but focused on whether the message itself met their interest or their needs. P01 and P05’s accounts indicate that they possessed curiosity about politically sensitive content. Their search for politically sensitive content was not affected by censorship as most critics worry, but by the fact that their curiosity was not strong enough for them to circumvent the Great Wall.

### 4.3.3 Online lecture

*Table 20. Online lecture*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Channel | Message | Frequency | What the participant learned |
| P05 | NetEase Open Lecture <http://open.163.com/> | Harvard University’ open lecture of Happiness | Once | How to be happy;  different ways of teaching and learning: |

P05 reported one-time use of Netease open lecture online. It indicates that lectures of foreign countries, especially top universities in English-speaking countries, might influence values like happiness and ways of teaching and learning of Chinese people through the Internet. NetEase Open Lecture is a public welfare programme launched in November 2010 by Netease, a Chinese Internet company that operates 163.com, a popular web portal ranked 27 by Alexa as of April 2014 (Alexa, 2014). The programme provides free translated lectures from world famous universities and other resources including TED, Khan Academy, and the like. It collects and offers more than 13,000 open lectures online.

## 4.4 Between acquaintances and strangers

### 4.4.1 QQ

Tencent QQ is an Internet-based instant messaging platform and a product of Tencent Holding Ltd, a publicly-owned holding company. It is the biggest online instant messaging service provider in China, with 76.2% market share (Zhang, unknown). First introduced to Chinese people in 1999, QQ active users reached 600 million in 2009 (Sabrina, 2014a). On April 11, 2014, Tencent QQ Peaking Concurrent Users hit 200 million for the first time and the number has doubled since 2010 (Sabrina, 2014b). To Chinese people, QQ is not only an Internet application, but also a popular cultural phenomenon that has influenced millions of Chinese people’s lifestyle (Zhang, unknown; Wu and Frantz, 2012). Revolving around QQ, Tencent developed various products, or any product ‘proven to be valuable by other companies’ (Sabrina, 2014a). Its products include Qzone, QQ mail, 3g QQ, QQ show, QQ games, QQ music/radio/live, QQ news, Tecent weibo, Qplus, Tenpay, Qcoin, Wechat, Peipei net (the largest online C2C store in China) and so on.

Qzone is QQ’s Facebook but much more personalised and claims to be the biggest online social network in China. Qzone users can play games, make up and dress their QQ image, upload photos, and write blogs and single sentences, called saysay (say something). Wechat is QQ’s WhatsApp, a mobile instant messaging platform, with more value-added services. Tencent has adopted ‘one-stop online service platform’ strategy (Wu and Frantz, 2012) and all QQ products are accessed through a single QQ account and one simple and clean platform. The most important strategy that contributes to the rise of Tencent Empire is that it ‘created almost every single possible instant messaging related peripheral feature to make sure different people with different needs can find something suitable within QQ’ (Zhang, unknown).

Despite its great popularity among Chinese people, there is a very small amount of literature studying Tencent QQ in China. The research on its political implications is even rarer. Most studies on Tencent QQ were conducted from an economic perspective (e.g. Wu & Frantz, 2012). Tencent Weibo was arguably more of a personalised centre than a communicating tool (Li, et al., 2012). Its content was dominated by daily feelings and entertainment, and average users had very limited influence in Tencent Weibo despite its ability to spread information to a wide audience (Li, et al., 2012). There is some content about Tencent QQ scattered in studies of instant message services, new media, or SNS (e.g. Deng, et al., 2010; Cara, 2011; Bethune, 2012). All in all, the social or political implications of Tencent QQ have hardly been studied independently.

*Table 21. QQ contacts: number, categories and frequent contacts*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Contact | | |
| Number of contacts | Categories of contacts | Frequent contacts |
| P01 | 400 in total;  Nearly 300 of them are known in real life. | Close friends;  Junior high school mates (tens);  Senior high school mates (nearly 100);  University mates (more than 100);  Strangers | No more than 20 |
| P02 | More than 300 | Senior high school classmates (about 60 people);  University classmates (30);  Family (about 20 to 30 people);  CQUPT girls (girls the participant knew from activities and societies in CQUPT);  CQUPT boys (boys the participant knew from activities and societies in CQUPT, about 30 to 40 people);  New friends (the smallest group, I usually don’t like to add strangers as QQ friends.) |  |
| P03 | A few more than 100 | Close friends;  High school;  University;  Web-game friends (4);  Aand one for my girlfriend. | Close friends and high school classmates. |
| P04 | “I deleted lots of QQ contacts.” “I could not tell who they were after long time without contact.” | Family;  Close friends;  Friends;  Acquaintances. | Close friends and friends located in other cities.. |
| P05 | Between 100 and 200 | High schoolmates;  University classmates & friends;  Internship colleagues;  University peers who signed the same company with me;  Home fellows;  People known from job interviews;  Family | Account for 10 to 20% of QQ contacts;  Former classmates, a few members of our family, not university classmates because we can meet each other. |
| P06 | More than 100 | All are classmates and friends:  “Schoolmates from primary school to university. I added all who I know. University mates account for a small proportion since my university life just began and know a very few people. The largest group is senior high school mates. I loose contact with lots of primary school mates. In term of number, the order is senior high school, junior high school, primary school and university.”  Several friends who went to a concert together. | Senior high school classmates: “We had been together for three years and are close to each other.” |
| P07 |  | Friends, former friends |  |
| P08 |  | Family and friends | Family and friends |

The in-depth interview participants, except P04 who did not report the number of her QQ contacts, had at least a little more than 100 QQ friends. Their QQ contacts can be categorised into four groups: friends; classmates, schoolmates, and people known from internship and job-hunting; family; and strangers. QQ contact kept people, mainly their peers they knew since high school, connected. And the number of contacts would grow when they knew more people from their new role. QQ contact is mainly a platform for acquaintances. The number of real life strangers remained a very small proportion of their QQ contacts. Despite the large number of QQ contacts, usually participants only contacted a small number of them frequently. And those whom they frequently contacted were close friends or classmates, newly departed or living in other cities. Only P08 reported that she frequently contacted her family.

*Table 22. QQ contacts: message*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Message | |
| What they communicate | What they do not communicate |
| P01 | Chatting, joking;  Greeting;  Asking out for a dinner;  Something funny or interesting;  Discussion on the matter that a contact asks the participant to do;  A friend asked the participant to share a man-made medical accident in a hospital. (Very occasionally) | Sharing content from other online resources (almost never);  News from other online resources (almost never);  News |
| P02 | Chatting, study, health | Do not communicate what I read online, news |
| P03 | Sometimes he chatted with his close friends mainly about feelings; sometimes he chatted with his high school mates because he missed those school days. |  |
| P04 | Chatting, where to play or eat. |  |
| P05 | About life: love, complaints about jobs, what is going on, about other members of the family, future career plans, why I did not choose the company, sometimes share what other classmates shared if we have common friends, job hunting, good PPT, moving stories, very occasionally about travel and university activities. | News like Xiaoyueyue (never) |
| P06 | Trivial matters of life:  “Memories of senior high school life, sometimes a little complaining, jokes among boys.” “The content of chatting is trivial matters of life.” | What is on Weibo. |
| P07 | Chat |  |
| P08 | Chat, video chat |  |
| P09 | Chat |  |
| P10 | Chat |  |
| P11 | Chat |  |
| P12 | Chat |  |

QQ is used as a chatting tool. In the participants’ words, chat with QQ contacts concentrates on trivial matters of life, joking, greeting, feelings, study, health, memories of being together, and plans for hanging out together. There is abundance literature on the influence of the conversation about daily life with peers on one’s social, emotional, and cognitive development or on the influence of primary groups on one’s socialisation. It is not the topic of this study. What this study finds significant is the capacity of QQ to keep peers who are apart, connected and keep daily conversation going conveniently and cheaply. In this way, the Internet allows daily exchange of information and interpretation of different life experiences which influence peers’ understanding of meanings of life and values. This is especially significant when their life is located in different cultures, or economic or political arrangements. This point will be further developed in Section 4.8.2 Twitter and Facebook. Moreover, QQ chatting is mainly text-based and interactive. Such a mode of communication forces the participants to think and express themselves. QQ chatting, requiring explicit linguistic acts of self-positioning, plays an important role in shaping its participants’ identities (Marolt & Herold, 2014).

*Table 23. QQ contacts: habit*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Habit |
| P02 | “QQ is always on when I am online.” |
| P03 | Always online, but sometimes chat |
| P04 | Not frequently used: Not on QQ every day, now on QQ during working hours;  “I must be watching online videos when I am on QQ, so I do not want to chat.” |
| P05 | “Logging on to QQ and then entering Qzone is my first when getting online.  But often I make my QQ invisible. Chatting is frequent when I am not busy.” |
| P06 | The second step online is to “log on to QQ, but not necessary talking to anyone.”  QQ is only a chatting tool and a tool to maintain emotional connection with former classmates:  “QQ is used as simply a chatting tool.”  “Now we are not at the same place, mainly it is QQ that is used to maintain the emotional connection with (former) classmates.”  “QQ is a good chatting tool in line with Chinese people’s operating habit. The window is very simple, not like Windowslive. And it is instant, convenient and can be used on mobile.” |

Four in-depth interview participants reported they always logged on to QQ when they went online, but did not necessarily chat with anyone.

*Table 24. QQ groups: number, categories and active groups*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Group | | |
| Number of groups | Categories of groups | Active QQ groups |
| P01 | Nearly 30 | Most groups are groups of classmates or schoolmates;  Groups established by classmates or schoolmates;  A university-based QQ bicycling group: “a very big group of strangers. They are all students of the university. Most members do not know each other in real life. There are small groups of two or three people who know each other in real life. Only tens of members are active in group discussion, members who know each other better discuss things among them.” | Two or three  The group of the class the participant is in;  The group of the participant’s childhood close friends. |
|  |
| P02 | 6 | **Hometown** fellow association;  **two** for senior high school classmates;  **two** for my current university friends;  **one** for a CQUPT summer vacation activity (going to the countryside programme) | 2  Most frequently chat in the group he created, the next most frequent is the group of my current class |
| P03 | Reported 6, but named 5 | Music software group created by the people who manage the software; | √ |
| High school; |  |
| Current university; | √ |
| One for the several classes that did the university military training together; |  |
| A gang of web-game player. P03 do not know much about the group members. |  |
| P04 | Many |  | 1  A group of several closest friends |
| P05 | 18 or 19 | Current classmates; former classmates; internship colleagues;  Minor course classmates;  Home fellows;  Others (she could not recall). |  |
| P06 | No more than 10 | Primary school; junior high school; senior high school; university |  |
|  | Chongqing Li Wen fans; |  |
|  | Mariah Carey’s fans; |  |
|  | CD collecting. |  |

The number of their QQ groups ranged from about 6 to 30. Their QQ groups fall into three groups: groups of or established by former or current classmates or schoolmates, groups of people who participated in the same school activities together, and groups of people who shared hobbies and interests. It indicates that hobbies and interests is a strong tie that brings strangers into groups online. Usually only one to three groups were active in communicating. The active groups were usually groups of close friends or groups of their current classmates. P02 reported he was most active in the group that he established.

*Table 25. QQ groups: what they do or do not communicate*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Message | | |
| What they communicate | | What they do not communicate |
| P01 | **Chatting;**  **Matter-oriented discussion:** Contact for something and then discuss the matter (occasionally);  Sharing of very meaningless information, for example, ten tips for beauty and care.  **Organising group activities:** Long and short distance bicycling. One short distance bicycling events may involve several people, eight at most among those I participated. Long distance events involve less people. For example, one rode to Tibet. Not much communication among people who do not know each other in real life during bicycling. More among those who know each other. | | Serious content (very limited) |
|  | Seldom involved in chatting;  **Organising group activities:** Invite people to go bicycling or express interest in other’s invitations. | |  |
| P02 | **Chats** and arranging gatherings like diners or small trips (**organising group activities); funny conversation, and issues of group interest:** sometimes our tutor or representatives released some information in it, sometimes there were discussions about the released message, information about study, complaining of bad teachers or courses, mostly caring about each other; sharing of learning experience, comments on news relevant to university students. | |  |
| P03 | What I say depends on what they say. Sometimes they make **funny statements**, I respond.  **Public issues:** Some would share a message about a lost child, the participant thought such messages were not trustworthy; activity arranging. | **Issues of group interest:** Opinions about the software, information and mutual help with the software, mobile phones or music searching, music recommendations. |  |
|  |  |
| Usually the participant just read the message, **funny conversation**, and sometimes **issues of group interest:** our tutor or representatives released some information in it, sometimes there were discussions about the released message, information about study, complaining of bad teachers or courses, mostly caring about each other. | Scholarship |
|  |  |
| The group organiser sometimes may say something. |  |
| P04 | Occasionally one-to-one in the active group: **What is going on recently** | |  |
| P05 | Current classmates: **organising group activities:** discuss together what our class does, for example hanging out or dining together; **issues of group interest:** sharing of course or study materials; rarely one shared an article he/she likes.  Home fellows: I almost do not talk. They talk about their jobs, usually among two or three of them.  Internship colleague: **for group informing or organising:** “It is for convenience. They can inform all of us when there is something.” | |  |
| P06 | Almost like chatting with QQ contacts, also not share anything, but share **funny pictures, rage comics, something entertaining to have some fun.** | | Call for help to find matching blood for ill people:  “It does not help to share it in QQ groups, there are limited number of people in QQ group.” |
| Information about Li Wen, **work, life and feelings**, like a family, **organising group activitie**s and issues of common interest: sometimes hanging out or short travelling within Chongqing, self-made posters, resources collected and made, concerts, receiving Li Wen at the airport, or group buying of concert tickets | |
| Latest information, self-made posters, resources collected and made, concerts, receiving Li Wen at the airport, or group buying of concert tickets. | |

QQ groups are not only used for chatting about life, work and feelings, funny conversations and sharing of meaningless content, they are also used for discussion of issues of common interest and organising group activities. They are occasionally used by some members to share public issues. Serious content is very limited in group conversation.

*Table 26. QQ groups: habit*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Habit |
| P01 | Block groups established by classmates or schoolmates.  For bicycling group: sometimes the participant read the group message without responding, sometimes he blocks the message. |
|  | Why? “ I want to go bicycling so that I find companions. It is more fun to go bicycling with companions. I do not know much about this area so that I want find this group.” |
| P02 | Blocked the groups of senior high school classmates and only posts when there was something important |
| P04 | “I seldom chat in QQ groups.” |

*Table 27. QQ groups: participant as an organiser of QQ groups*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Participant as an organiser of QQ groups |
| P02 | The participant found his hometown fellows in CQUPT through schoolmate website, created a QQ group and then added them in. His purpose was to help the fresh students, get help from the junior or senior students and facilitate communication. |

*Table 28. Qzone: who and message*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Who | Message |
| P02 | P02 and his QQ contacts | **What the participant posted:** Pictures (**about life**, university events, sceneries, and family, blogs (mostly **about life and feelings**), sharing of online contents (mostly **study resources**, and then about **love**), **entertainment news, MV**, sometimes good articles he read on a literature website.. |
| P03 | P3 and his QQ contacts | **What the participant shares and posts:** He usually viewed what his QQ friends were doing, but seldom shared or wrote something. He posted several words or sentences when there was a problem between him and his girlfriend and **he felt bad**. They would ask what happened. And he also shared **something humorous**. Sometimes he shared **the slogans of university activities**.  **What his QQ friends share or post:** **Nothing important or serious**, generally **something funny**, such as humour, how they **felt** about their university days and leaving home. |
| P05 |  | **What I post:** articles with **philosophical ideas and entertaining videos** “I share articles with philosophical ideas, about **life planning**, something similar to this, for example about **career,** what one should do when starting their careers, and some entertaining videos. That is what I can remember. There must be something left out.” “They come from what others share.”  **What Qzone friends share:** **about life and feelings; study**  “Pretty much everything. They share mini novels, minimovies. There are a very few mininovels. I almost viewed all of them, but I seldom share them. I cannot recall the others.” “Usually they are love stories, and some life philosophy, to draw an inspiring or thrilling conclusion from a short story.”  “Some share study materials, for example vocabulary for English tests, Chinese English translation everybody should know, something like that. There are a very few professional data like website data or data base.”  **Photos of hanging out or travelling**  Social problems and current affairs: “I hardly encountered such articles. Somebody may post what they feel or think about a political affair. I only have such an impression, because there are too few of them.”, “I can give you an example. At the time of the infant formula milk scandal, someone may express the miseries they as who were born in 1990s have experienced.”, “But there are very very very few of such posts. Usually male students post such content.” |
| P06 |  | “I hardly shared anything on Qzone, **some photos of the stars** I like, and **some events or programmes of my college**. That is all.” |
| P08 | Classmates | **Social issues** about issues about social conscience; city inspectors, old people who live on waste collecting, Xiaoyueyue incident. |
| P12 |  | **Classmates’ status** |

For most participants, what they shared and their Qzone friends shared concentrated on three subjects: their status, entertainment, and study. Content about social and current affairs was rarely shared or discussed in Qzone. It confirms findings of previous studies. However, both P08 and P10 regarded Qzone as one of the two online sources of news (see Table 13).

*Table 29. Qzone: frequency and habit*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Frequency | Habit |
| P02 | The frequency of sharing or posting was low. | His Qzone is coded. Only his QQ contacts can access it. |
| P03 | Frequently | “I first log onto Qzone when I get online. Usually I surf on Qzone only.” |
| P05 | Frequently | First step of online surfing;  “When I have time to kill, really, I cannot help it. I will surf Qzone.”  “I share what others share. Currently I have not tended to find something to share from other regular sources. |
| P06 | Seldom | “I do not like using Qzone” |
| P08 |  | Search for information while viewing;  “Many social issues I came across are from retweeted articles in Qzone.” |

There is a difference between Qzone and Microbloging. When using microblog, any user can choose to follow another user without his/her permission, which means that one’s microblog is a public place literally available to anyone, whereas a user can make his/her Qzone available only to his/her QQ contacts through coding. Qzone can shift between a public place and a private place. For example, P02 reported that he coded his Qzone and made it a private place.

### 4.4.2 Renren

Renren is China’s leading real-name social network (Techrice, 2011) with more than 160 million users (AppLeap & Great Wall Club, 2010). Renren is considered the ‘Facebook of China’ (Marshall, 2008). With its prime aim to target college students as the main users as Facebook originally did, Renren is most popular with university students (Zhang, 2011) as China’s largest online community website among universities (Song, 2010). As a SNS in China, Renren does not seem to have played any significant role in discussion of public affairs or political mobilisation. There is not much research focusing on that aspect of Renren. In most cases, Renren is studied as one of the most influential SNSs, microblogging sites, or new media in China with only a brief introduction (e.g. Cara, 2011). Renren is articulated as crucial for young people in terms of both online and offline identity and sociality management.

Qiu, Lin and Leung (2012) studied the cultural differences and behavioural switching between Renren and Facebook using self-report measures and content analyses of the online activities of thirty-seven Chinese undergraduate students at a large Singapore university participating in exchange for payment. They found cross-cultural differences between Renren and Facebook with the culture of former more collectivistic than that of the latter. The Renren culture was perceived by the participants as ‘being more sharing-oriented, conformity-oriented, hierarchical, and less egalitarian’ (p.112). They suggested that online culture was more of a reflection of offline culture rather than a new one created in a virtual world. Moreover, the results of their study demonstrated that participants ‘flexibly switched their behavioural tendency’ on the two technically identical but culturally different online communities. The Internet makes it possible for its users to experience different cultures in the virtual world. They argued that though active virtual social interaction SNS users could acquire multicultural experiences. This study left the long-term influence unexamined. For example, will the virtual multicultural experiences improve individuals’ cultural competence or creative cognitions or lead individuals to acculturate into those foreign cultures? Will the behavioural changes be internalised?

*Table 30. Renren: friends and frequency*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Renren friends | | Frequency |
|  | Number | Categories |
| P01 | 50 to 60, not many | Most Renren friends are from the university the participant studies in;  Some Renren friends are strangers in real life. | Occasionally, not frequently used, about once a week. |
| P02 |  |  | Low |
| P04 | Plenty of, I don’t know, maybe several hundreds | Classmates: junior & senior high school; university,  Some people who know me or my friends’ classmates | Seldom, more frequently when in the first and second year of university. |
| P05 | About 30 or 40 |  | Once a month. |
| P07 |  |  | Mentioned using it. |
| P12 |  | Classmates, schoolmates. |  |

Six out of twelve participants reported or mentioned that they had used Renren. Four participants reported their frequency of usage and they all reported a low frequency. The number of Renren friends ranges greatly from 30 to several hundred. Renren friends are found to be mainly classmates, schoolmates, and friends’ classmates, but also strangers, and other acquaintances.

*Table 31. Renren: what do they communicate?*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Message | | |
|  | What Renren friends share | What the participant shares | Conversation or interaction |
| P01 | Something that makes people laugh;  Videos;  Music. | Videos of music (most frequently);  Cartoons that he likes (occasionally);  The participant’s status. | In most cases, sharing content without interaction;  No interaction with strangers. |
| P02 |  | Good articles from a literature website |  |
| P04 | What P4 usually reads: photos of people she knows (photos of their daily life or travelling, hanging out)  What P4 usually does not read: others’ status, posts of people she does not know, news, videos.  Usually she just views photos they post, nothing else. “I did not notice what others post.” | Her Renren posts were viewed more than 2,000 times. “Recently I posted photos of going out with my boyfriend. It has been about one or two years since my last posting. It has been a long time that I haven’t post any photos.” |  |
| P05 | “During my job hunting, someone from a university posted his/her job hunting experience. It seems that is it.” | “My page was only viewed about between 20 and 30 times. I seldom view what others post and rarely shared anything.” |  |
| P11 | Their status |  |  |
| P12 | Their status |  |  |

What the participants and their Renren friends shared concentrates on their status. They also shared music, videos, good articles, and something that made people laugh. Both sharing and viewing occurred at a low frequency. Interaction was even rarer.

### 4.4.3 Weibo (Microblog)

Weibo, or microblogging service, began in China in 2007 when the earliest notable weibo services like Fanfou (饭否), Jiwai (叽歪), Digu (嘀咕), and Zuosa（做啥）were launched. These services are very similar to their American counterpart, Twitter. Weibo became a popular Internet service in China. According to CNNIC’s 30th statistical report on Internet development in China, ‘one of every two Chinese netizens used Weibo in 2012’ (Fu, 2013).

The largest microblog system in China is Sina Weibo launched on Aug 28 2009. Charles Chao, Sina.com's CEO, seized the opportunity when the Chinese government shut down most of the domestic Weibo services, including Fanfou and Jiwai, and blocked many popular non-China-based microblogging services such as Twitter, Facebook and Plurk after the July 2009 Ürümqi riots (Ramzy, 2011; Epstein, 2011). Benney (2014) believes that Sina Weibo’s appearance ‘after a large-scale purge of all other microblog services’ suggests its close link to the party-state and its apparatus of censorship (p.177). Like Twitter, Sina Weibo allows users to post 140-character text messages, retweet and reply to others’ tweets, follow whoever they are interested in, whereas, ‘the messages can be more specific and detailed’ because each Chinese character carries a lot more information than an English letter (Epstein, 2013). Besides texts, Sina Weibo has the ability to insert rich media like images, videos, music, emoticons, and even polls without any plugin required. Sina claimed that its Weibo service had 503 million registered users at the end of 2012 (Epstein, 2013; Mozur, 2013; Wee, 2013). It is estimated by Shanghai-based RedTech Advisors LLC that Sina Weibo takes 56.5% market share on active users basis and 86.6% browsing time basis in 2010 (Chao, 2011). The second leading microblog platform in China is Tencent (QQ) Weibo which started its services in April 2010. Other players include Sohu, Baidu, ifeng, and NetEase.

The law in China requires the microblog service providers to ‘guarantee that flows of information are under control’ (Lee, 2012, p.614). Therefore, microblog service providers, such as Sina Weibo use both ‘sophisticated censorship software’ and ‘groups of human censors’ (Epstein, 2011; Lee, 2012; Sullivan, 2012; Ng, 2013). Since March 2012, microblog service providers have been further required by the government to implement real-name registration systems for all microblog users (Hille, 2012). Since 16th March, 2012, new users of Sina Weibo have to register with their real name, with an identity check, but Sina also claimed that it was not certain when to implement the real-name registration for its old users.

Despite those regulatory measures, however, there has been frequent and vibrant discussion about their capacity to bring the country political or societal changes (Qiang, 2011; Ramzy, 2011; Qian, 2011; Canaves, 2011; Epstein, 2013; Hassid, 2012; Yang, 2009; Fu, 2013). One word can perfectly explain the phenomenon; that is ‘balance’ (Gallo, 2012). As the Sina executive explained that to operate microblogging in China, a company could not follow an ‘all or nothing’ approach, but ‘take a middle position’. He compared running microblogging service in China to cancing with chains. Microblogging have been making dramatic changes in China for the better and made an enormous difference in news distribution. There is not a want of examples. Sina Weibo has played an active and influential role in the anti-corruption fight and it has forced mining companies to improve their safety procedures. Chinese microbloggers have broken a number of news reports like “My Father is Li Gong” (Wines, 2010) and “Death of Qian Yuen Hui” (Yang, 2010). Pan Shiyi, one of China’s most famous microbloggers, has made the PM2.5 air-quality standard known to many Chinese people and ‘played a big part in a battle to force the authorities to clean up China’s filthy air’ (Epstein, 2013).

While citizen journalistic functions and the mobilising power of microblogging constitute the prevalent concerns of the scholars, the western media, and the mass media and political circles in China, they seem to comprise a tiny portion of the overall microblog environment. Research indicates that what most Chinese microbloggers primarily share and forward is not ‘serious’ content but jokes, images and videos in order to entertain instead of to inform or mobilise (Roberts, 2010; Yu, 2011). Meanwhile, large data research also evidenced that Chinese microblogging space was taken as an information source instead of a public sphere for deliberation and mobilisation. It is suggested that the party-state plays a part in developing the microblogging service in a way that promotes superficial use oriented toward entertainment and consumption (Benney, 2014). Benney (2014) observes that the market and the state collaborate with their converging interests to shape the landscape of microblogging in China. Not only do they censor the flow of information, more importantly and unnoticeably, the aesthetic features and architecture of microblog interfaces represented by Sina Weibo is also designed to stifle meaningful in-depth political communication (Benney, 2014). The majority of Chinese microbloggers are young and well educated (iResearch, 2011). Better educated and more affluent urbanites dominate the Weibo space and about 5% of Weibo users generated more than 80% of the original posts (Guo, et al., 2012; Fu & Chau, 2013).

This part presents the findings of this study concerning the participants’ reports and understanding of their Weibo use. It also includes an introduction of thirteen Sina Weibo accounts followed by the participants and results of thematic analysis of the first one or two pages of the thirteen Weibo accounts.

*Table 32. Weibo: service provider, anonymity, frequency and number of followers*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Weibo service provider | Anonymity | Frequency | Number of followers | Number of followings |
| P01 | Sina Weibo | Anonymous | Every day, a major online activity | 138 | Many |
| P02 | Sina Weibo |  | Not frequently | Dozens | No idea |
| P03 | Sina Weibo |  | Seldom | No more than twenty | No more than twenty |
| P04 | Sina Weibo |  | Every day, a major online activity | More than 200 | More than 200 |
| P06 | Sina Weibo |  | Every day, claim to be a Weibo lover | More than 400 | More than 200 |

Non-frequent Weibo users had less than twenty followers while frequent Weibo users had a much larger number of followers. Accordingly, frequent Weibo users followed a larger number of Weibo accounts. Benney (2014) suggests that the interface of Sina Weibo is designed to encourage superficial information consumption and networking instead of in-depth political communication. According to him, this is achieved by encouraging users to attract more followers and by continuous flow of information which allows little time for users to really concern themselves or think deeply about the content. The accounts of the participants seem to support his hypothesis. Firstly, in the view of the participants, there is pride in having a large number of followers and vice versa. Frequent Weibo users tend to have a significant number of followers and followings. P06 who had the largest number of followers said, “I hope to attract following and retweeting which brings me a sense of achievement… Increasing number of followers gains me face (brings me honour)” (see Table 36). P02 who had relatively a small number of followers tried to explain why uneasily, as if it is not something commendable. Secondly, the flow of information on Weibo is continuous and at a relatively high speed. When he explained why he seldom used his Sina Weibo, P03 said, “actually I think that Weibo is annoying, because there are always tweets coming out with very short intervals” (see Table 34). The flow of information on P04 and P06’s Weibo must be speedier than that on P03’s considering that P03 followed no more than twenty accounts. However, it is difficult to categorically prove for what purpose it is designed this way, political control, economic gain or both.

*Table 33. Weibo: who do I follow?*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Who I follow | | |
| P01 | Topic-oriented accounts (4 open codes): The Sina Weibo accounts whose user names indicate the topics of their tweets. | | |
| Humour | Psychology | Exercise book |
| Individual-oriented accounts (17 open codes): The Sina Weibo accounts that use their real names or nick names which do not indicate the topics of the tweets as their user names. | | |
| I. Acquaintance (1 open code): The Weibo users and the participant know each other in real life.  P01 reported that he had one or two acquaintances on Sina Weibo. He would check whether or not his acquaintances were on Sina Weibo right after he logged in, but would not communicate with them even if they were on.  II. Stranger (16 open codes): Weibo accounts, or users, who do not know the participant either in real life or online. The participant knows them only online.  i. Star (2 open codes): Movie, film, or sports stars or singers  i). Who they are (1 open code): Yao Chen, Chen Kun  ii). What they tweet (1 open code): trivial things of life  ii. Celebrity (14 open codes): The Weibo users the participant refers to as celebrities.  i). Number of followed celebrities: several  ii). Purpose of following: to read for himself  iii). Who they are: Han Han, Li Kaifu, Fang Zhouzi, Ren Zhiqiang, and other that he could not remember  What they tweet:  Han Han: he claimed that he did not know much about Han Han and thought that he was talented. Han Han’s experience aroused the participant’s doubt about formal education.  Li Kaifu: innovation incubator  Fang Zhouzi: Fang revealed some malfeasance. His wrangles with Han Han, Li Kaifu and Tan Jun.  Ren Zhiqiang: Just knew he was famous, but he did not know much about him  What the participant thinks of them: P01 did not like Fang. On the one hand, P01 thought that most of Fang’s revelations of malfeasance were based on facts. On the other hand, P01 thought that Fang pretended to know things he did not know and intended to make profits by revealing malfeasance. | | |
| P02 | Topic-oriented accounts: Lecture Room, the state’s official Weibo accounts, Weibo accounts for TV entertainment programmes and variety show programmes. | | |
| Individual-oriented accounts: Friends, scholars, stars (Most Weibo (I follow) are not stars), celebrities | | |
| Stars: Li Weijia; He Jiong, Singer Zhang Jie | | Celebrity: Yu Minhong |
| P03 | All close friends and the official Weibo of Q Pet Game (A webgame for interaction among friends and provided by Tecent group) | | |
| P04 | In great variety | | |
| Entertainment & leisure: stars; constellation; food; travel; beautiful women; beautiful babies; dogs; latest fashion street shoot | | |
| Stars: He Jiong, Wang Lihong, Xiao S, Zhao Wei, Su Qi, Cai Kongyong, Xie Na, Du Haitao, Fan Weiqi, | | |
| Finance and economics: Lang Xianping, Ba Shusong, Shi Hanbing, Chen Zhiwu, Professors in Finance of Yale University, other I cannot remember. | | |
| News: Top news | | |
| Closest friends; Classmates: “I follow only a few classmates because we follow each other on Renren.” | | |
| P06 | Music (relatively more acquaintances); politics (“almost all strangers, I follow them, but they do not follow me in return.” There is interaction between him and a history teacher in Sichuan University and a Taiwan student in mainland China); Weibo celebrities; group buying (commercial organisations); about ten CouchSurfing friends; QQ fans group friends.  “I follow more than 200 people. There are two or three who make political statements. The rest are all fans of European and American music.” | | |

The Weibo accounts they follow fall into two categories: acquaintances and strangers. Strangers are classified into three categories: stars and celebrities; Weibo accounts for programmes, organisations and institutions; and Weibo accounts of common users. P03 followed only a very small number of accounts on Weibo who were all close friends. The only exception was the official Weibo of Q Pet Game. To another four participants, Sina Weibo is mainly a platform for strangers. They followed more strangers on Weibo than they did on any other Internet applications they used.

The following part presents what the researcher found about the twelve Sina accounts the participants reported they followed.

***Psychology***

The account is established by a user who reports himself to be a man who works at a psychological theory research institution in Hebei province and studied psychology at Capital University of Economics and Business, Beijing, China. He introduces himself with two lines on Weibo: “Self-actualisation is our highest need.” “We need to become strong inside.” He labels himself with four themes: Soup for the soul, Diary, Self-improvement, and Spiritual perfection. He started to tweet on 27th August, 2011 and has posted 1,603 tweets. Now he follows 199 Weibo users and has 32,607 followers[[57]](#footnote-57). His every tweet consists of three parts: a heading with about thirteen Chinese characters in a square bracket, for example 【Evolutionary psychology: What makes Gangnam Style so popular】, a short paragraph that presents a finding in psychological research, and a somewhat relevant picture. His latest tweets were posted on 17th March 2013. Usually he posted from one to thirteen tweets a day, two or three days in sequence and then a one or several month interval. There were a total of 114 tweets in six pages available when the researcher consulted on 31st May 2013.

***Exercise book***

The account is established by a user who introduces himself as a famous psychotic (jīng shén bìng huàn zhě, 精神病患者, English: a person who suffers mental illness). Till 12th May 2013 he had used Sina Weibo for five years. He has posted 3,876 tweets. Now he follows 1,039 Weibo users and has 6,121,772 followers[[58]](#footnote-58).The researcher read the first two pages of his Weibo which included 40 tweets. In general he is a social critic. Most of his tweets criticise the hottest social issues in an ironic way. The whole second page is about the Ya’an Earthquake in Sichuan Province which was happening during that period. He criticises the reporters who disturbed the doctors or rescuers in the process of rescuing, and the press conference of the local government which failed to provide useful and well-organised information to the public. He also retweets and makes short comments on the touching moments in the rescue and when individuals face such a natural disaster, passes on tweets that help people who are lost or have lost their family members to find each other, and reveals how some swindlers use the Internet or mobiles to con money out of the people who try to help those who suffered in the disaster. He identifies himself as a post-1980, which refers to the generation born in the 1980s, and posts self-deprecating humour about the bad things their generation have been through, such as the ideological education, the infant formula milk scandal, the environmental pollution, the food security problems, the high estate price, and so on. He writes blogs, too and posts his blogs on Sina Weibo.

***Yao Chen***

Yao Chen is a famous movie and film star in China. She introduced herself as a very modest marinated egg. She has posted 6,761 tweets. Now she follows 580 Weibo users and has 47,377,310 followers[[59]](#footnote-59). The researcher analysed the 30 tweets on her first page. There were 17 tweets about her life, mostly her new photos, a dish cooked, a place she wants to go or a greeting with a picture; 11 retweets of other stars’ tweets or entertainment news such as news about another star or movie, music, event in the entertainment industry; nine retweets of news which were the head news, but not pointing to the government, such as H7N, Chinese tourist’s misconduct in Egypt, child trafficking, and so on; two quotes from books about environmental protection and the good old days when life was simple; and one retweet of a report about what a leading physicist has suffered during the Cultural Revolution.

***Chen Kun***

Chen Kun is a famous movie and film star in China. He is also the founder of The Power of Hiking, a public welfare project. The project emphasises the power of love, heart, belief and dreams on the way of hiking, also of life, and the spirit of not living a mediocre life and to create a life of one’s own with a strong will that fears no hardship. The project encourages people, especially young people, university students, to see the world, listen to their own hearts and spread the power of love through hiking and to discover, to give and to release themselves on the way of hiking[[60]](#footnote-60). He has posted 3,434 tweets. Now he follows 472 Weibo users and has 44,750,812 followers[[61]](#footnote-61). The researcher analysed the 45 tweets on his first page. There were 17 tweets about his life, nine of which were about his The Power of Hiking project and several sentences to express his attitudes towards life. And there were another six retweets that expressed attitudes toward life. There were 17 retweets with very short comments about social issues. Most of them (seven out of 17) were about teenage girl sexual assaults by their teachers, headmasters and government officials which was one of the hottest issues. The other major topic was charity events. Other retweets included the social problem of the parents who lost their only child, environment protection, and power abuse of governmental officials at village level. The remaining five tweets were about other stars’ events including one report about a famous tennis player, Li Na.

***Han Han***

Han Han is a famous writer, speed racer and magazine editor in China. With 166,751,183 followers on Sina Weibo[[62]](#footnote-62), he is surely ‘the most popular blogger in the world’ (Tatlow, 2010; Osnos, 2011; Pilling, 2012; Johnson, 2012). He criticised the education system, the government, the censorship and so on, yet he is certainly very careful not ‘to overstep the golden rule of dissent in China: measured criticism is okay, but not advocacy of systemic change’ (Johnson, 2012). His success proved that he played well within the boundaries of the government. There were a record of 76 tweets[[63]](#footnote-63) on Sina Weibo when consulted, but he posted more tweets. Some of his tweets were deleted by censors because they were politically sensitive and some by himself for the selling of his books. He follows 737 Weibo users. There is no content analysis of his tweets on Sina Weibo since, as he claimed that most of his sensitive blogs have been deleted.

***Kaifu Lee***

Kaifu Lee, or so-called Li Kaifu, was ranked 51 in The 2013 Time 100 (Huffington, 2013). He had worked for Apple, Microsoft’s China research division and Google China as the founding president. ‘In 2009, he founded Innovation Works, an incubator for Chinese tech start-ups’ (Huffington, 2013). Time labelled him as an ‘icon of online freedom’ and Forbes ‘the King of China’s equivalent of Twitter’ because of his embrace of social media. He posted 11,839 tweets, has followed 487 Weibo accounts and had 43,057,607 followers[[64]](#footnote-64). He believed that ‘social media was revolutionising the way people communicate with each other and could change China for the better’ (He, 2013). He revealed a chart that demonstrated how often he was censored by Sina Weibo. According to the chart, averagely 3.4 tweets were deleted per week during the 33 weeks from 29th July 2012 to 17th March 2013 (Millward, 2013). On Sina Weibo, he retweets the hot social issues and makes short comments to criticise the government. He also retweets humour, healthy tips and tech innovations.

***Fang Zhouzi***

Fang Zhouzi is the pen-name of Fang Shimin who is a writer and blogger in China. In 2000, Fang began his self-directed efforts to investigate the fraud, plagiarism, and academic malfeasance of Chinese science and exposed these escapades in his New Threads website (Anonymous, 2012; Osnos, 2010). He won the John Maddox Prize in 2012. He has been sued for libel in several cases, and once mugged by those he has accused of misdeeds. In 1995, Fang received his Ph.D. in biochemistry at Michigan State University (Anonymous, 2013). He has posted 11,684 tweets, followed 28 accounts and had 4,827,641 followers[[65]](#footnote-65). Fang criticised Mu Zimei who became famous overnight by exposing her sex diary online. Mu Zimei used very strong words to abuse and curse Fang’s young daughter on Sina Weibo. On 13th August 2012, Fang made an announcement on Sina Weibo that he would stop updating on Sina Weibo because Sina Weibo rejected his report about Mu Zimei’s abuses and declared that his counterattack violated the regulation. He asked his follower to follow him on Soho Weibo.

***Ren Zhiqiang***

Ren Zhiqiang is the Chairman of Beijing-based Hua Yuan Real Estate Group. Ren Zhiqiang once was voted ‘one of the most hated men in Chinese history in an online poll’ because of his ‘public comments, in particular his comment that commercial residential housing is for the rich and not the poor’(Chao, 2011). By using Sina Weibo to ‘explain his views and answer his critics’, he eases the hatred against him to a considerable extent. He has posted 54,649 tweets, followed 119 accounts and had 14,742,127 followers[[66]](#footnote-66). When consulted on 7th June, he posted 30 tweets. The majority of them were retweets with very brief comments. He retweeted the hot social issues that criticised abuse of power by government officials, monopoly of state-owned mobile enterprise and social injustice. Two of his tweets were deleted by himself and one that praised the American people could not be accessed with a notice that it was inappropriate to open to the public. The most politically sensitive one was a retweet of Lianhe Zaobao’s (literally ‘United Morning Paper’, the largest Singapore-based Chinese-language newspaper) interview with Professor He Weifang who supported constitutionalism about the future of political reform in China.

***Lecture Room***

Sina Weibo account for a Channel 10, CCTV (China Central Television) programme with the same name. The programme broadcasts lectures by famous scholars on the history and culture of China. The programme aims to popularise excellent traditional Chinese culture through establishing a bridge between scholars, experts and the audience. Its Sina Weibo account simply updates the videos of the programmes.

***Li Weijia***

He is a famous TV host for a very popular entertainment programme named Happy Camp, on Hunan TV. He follows 202 accounts, has 7,391,033 followers and posts 2806 tweets[[67]](#footnote-67). The majority of his tweets are about his programmes. The rest are about his daily life. All tweets are pictures, videos or audios accompanied by a few words or short sentences.

***He Jiong***

He is a famous TV host for a very popular entertainment programme named Happy Camp, on Hunan TV. He follows 540 accounts, has 33,845,162 followers and posts 5311 tweets[[68]](#footnote-68). His tweets are about his programmes, daily life, or mottoes. All tweets are pictures, videos or audios accompanied by a few words or short sentences.

***Yu Minhong***

Yu Minhong, also known as Michael Yu, is the founder and current CEO of New Oriental Education & Technology Group Inc., ‘one of the world’s wealthiest educators’ and ‘the largest provider of private educational services in China in terms of students, programs and geographic swath’ (Anonymous, 2012). He came from a poor rural family and established his career and fortune with his strong mind and two hands from nothing and his success inspired and encouraged lots of people, especially university students in China. He follows 151 accounts, has 10,538,579 followers and posts 672 tweets[[69]](#footnote-69). His tweets are about his programmes, daily life, or mottoes. His tweets are about how to succeed in one’s career and life mostly based on his life experience; how to be a good manager or leader; courses and products of his company; media events about him; comments on news about higher education entrance examinations, food security, defacing of an Egyptian relic by a Chinese teen etc.; his daily life; recommendations of books; and mottoes. Most of his tweets are words instead of pictures or videos. There are only two tweets of TV programmes about him accompanied by videos.

***Lang Xianping***

Lang Xianping is a professor of finance at the Chinese University of Hong Kong with a PhD from the University of Pennsylvania’s famous Wharton School of Economics (Zhao, 2008, p.290). ‘Lang is an institutional economist and a Keynesian liberal in the Western context’ (p.293), but he describes himself as a bourgeois metropolitan economist and ‘was labelled as a leftist’ in the Chinese context. He is the leading figure of the “Lang Xianping Storm”, a heated debate on SOE（state-owned enterprises）reform between late 2004 and early 2005. The storm began with Lang’s criticism of ‘unaccountable transfer of public assets’, the SOEs, into ‘the hands of private capitalists’ (p.293) in the process of SOE reform and ultimately resulted in a heated debate ‘about the trajectory, consequences, social orientations, and future directions of China’s entire reform process’ (p.296) in the popular media and on the Internet. Lots of actors in Chinese society and their representatives joined the debate to speak and fight for their interests in the name of protecting the Chinese people, especially workers and farmers. These actors and representatives include different factions within the CPC, private capitalists, small-and-middle-sized enterprises, popular media, intellectuals, governmental officials, and the middle class. Zhao (2008) maintains that the debate reveals ‘the power of elite economists in shaping China’s transformation’ and ‘the dynamic and conflicts’ within the party-state (p.326). In the debate, however, the voice of workers and farmers was absent or only utilised by other actors to support their arguments.

It is plausible to argue that the whole event was not accidental at all. Nor was it the result of a ‘kind-hearted’ economist fighting for the interests of Chinese workers and farmers. It happened right after the transition of power from the Jiang Zemin leadership to that of Hu Jintao. During the former’s leadership, the Chinese economy was marked by dominance of neoliberalism and privatisation of SOEs and debates about social or political implications of the reform were silenced or received ‘cool treatment’. The latter initiated readjustment of ‘the party’s developmental policies and ideological orientations’ (Zhao, 2008, p.289). The debate created favourable media environment for a series of policies that the latter implemented, for example, tightening up the central government’s supervision of the privatisation process and prohibiting SOE managers from buying large SOEs and state shares in state-controlled shareholding companies (p.327).

Lang registered as a Sina Weibo user on 20th January 2010. He does not follow any accounts, has 17,227,061 followers and posts 372 tweets[[70]](#footnote-70). There are 44 tweets on the first page of his Sina Weibo account. Among them, thirteen are about publication of his new books or excerpts from his new books. His books analyse the reform in China and reflect on the changes, opportunities and challenges of the next ten years. For example, his book, *Lang Xianping says: hopes in depression*, lists ten obstacles to development and a free economy. They are the administrative examination and approval system, monopoly, tax, financing, low prices, talent, society, fake products, globalisation, and law. Twelve tweets are hot social and political issues, including criticism of monopoly of the State Grid Corporation of China, inequality of the education system in China, analysis of the hazy weather in Beijing and Shanghai, China’s recent border frictions with the Philippines, the heavy deficit of China’s pension system, and incompatibility of WTO rule and China’s export restrictions on rare earth elements and the minor metals of molybdenum and tungsten. There are eight tweets declaring that some articles published in his name are not written by him. Six tweets forecast a TV programme named *Finance in Lang’s Eyes* on Guangdong TV, three encourage his Weibo followers to follow his Wechat account, and one introduces his father’s book about his father’s eighty years of life, especially his accounts of Jiang Jieshi, the first leader of KMT (Kuo Min Tang).

A number of people from different areas came to have power in the Chinese blogosphere. The thirteen Weibo accounts analysed fall into four categories: grassroots celebrities including Psychology and Exercise book; celebrities including Han Han, Kaifu Lee, Fang Zhouzi, Ren Zhiqiang, Yu Minhong and Lang Xianping; stars including Yao Chen, Chen Kun, Li Weijia and He Jiong; and the Weibo account for the TV programme Lecture Room. Eight out of thirteen accounts post content about hot social and political issues. Three accounts post very politically sensitive content and claimed that they have experienced deletion of posts regularly. The existence of the politically sensitive content the researcher found and analysed can be interpreted in another way. Its existence proves that it is tolerated by the party-state since the party-state exerts strict censorship and encourages self-censorship on the blogosphere (Epstein, 2011; Lee, 2012; Sullivan, 2012; Ng, 2013).

An overview of what the participants followed on Sina Weibo reveals an orientation toward entertainment and leisure as found in previous studies. A close examination of the Weibo accounts, however, demonstrates that the participants may encounter more political and social content than it appears. The vast majority of the Weibo accounts, ten out of thirteen, the participants reported share one thing in common. They are the accounts of the new-rich in China. It is hard to confirm the true identity of the owners of the two grassroots celebrities. There is evidence drawn from their Weibo content that they belong to the urban middle class. It is thus plausible to argue that the content the participants exposed themselves to in Chinese microblogging space is mainly, if not exclusively, produced by Chinese middle-and-above classes.

*Table 34. Weibo: why do I follow?*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Why I follow |
| P01 | To satisfy his curiosity;  To read something interesting. |
| P03 | Why I do not follow: “Actually I think that Weibo is annoying, because there are always tweets coming out with very short intervals.” |
| P04 | “I follow the Weibo of stars I like and also find their Weibo interesting.” |
| P06 | As a source of information: Weibo is one of the major sources of his information.  “Because a great amount of information is available on Weibo.” |

Interest, curiosity, and need for information are the three reasons P01, P04 and P06 reported.

*Table 35. Weibo: what do I follow and how?*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | What I follow | How I follow |
| P01 | Most frequently read: nothing important or serious, psychology, humour, beautiful pictures, videos, something funny or interesting. | Followed several people that Sina Weibo recommended. |
| There were no settled criteria to choose who to follow. |
| infrequently read: acquaintances’ tweets about their daily life. | Follow people who P01 found interesting when reading news |
| Others’ recommendations. |
| P02 | Life experience of celebrities: “The celebrities I follow tweet about their life experience.”  Celebrities’ retweets of and comments on current affairs  Stars’ events and mottoes | Sina Weibo recommendation;  Friends (follow each other). |
| P03 | News from the official Weibo of Q Pet Game. |  |
| P04 | Something entertaining, their life, programmes, events, songs, advertisements, usually words with pictures; some quotes from *Bible*; quotes from his book (about love). | “First I followed the stars and celebrities I like and my closest friends, some I knew from my previous Blog. (I stopped using Blog when I had my microblog.). If I read someone’s retweet and find the source interesting, I will follow the source. If I find a baby beautiful, I might follow his/her mother. This is how my following grows.” |
| “Usually I read Lang Xianping’s tweets, because his opinions are close to the reality. If something happens, he will analyse.” “about his programmes”; “he also comments on current hot topics.”  “The frequency of encountering economics celebrities’ tweets on Weibo is not high.” |
| P06 | Music (1/3); food and amusement group buying websites (4/15); national current affairs and politics (1/15).  Content from Youtube, Facebook and Twitter:  “There resources online, for example about European and American stars. Because Youtube, Facebook and Twitter are blocked in China, but there is latest information about those stars, or what is happening in foreign countries appearing in real time. There are people who get resources there and then post on unblocked websites in China…There are people on Weibo who open special accounts. Some post entertainment information and some post international new from foreign countries and make comments.”  Critiques of inflation in China: “Someone posted a comparison of income in China and America, what is the percentage of viewing an IMAX of *Avatar* in their income and said that the rising of commodity price and inflation in China is a bit scary.”  Star’s advertisements (for their albums). | Acquaintance and interests:  “It starts with following people around you who retweet others’ tweets. Sometimes others label themselves. For example, my labels include European and American music and fashion. Others will read your labels and your tweets and follow you if you have similar tastes and interests. That is also how I follow others.” |
| P09 | News and comments |  |
| P11 | Shared information |  |

Social networking applications’ public space, Weibo in particular (see also Qzone), is found to work as an important source of political information next to news portals. It was found that P01, P02, P04, and P06 all had followed Weibo accounts that posted news and comments on hot social and political issues, but the proportion of such content was small and the frequency of encountering such content was low. The study found three mechanisms that affected the participants’ choice of who they follow: Sina weibo’s recommendation and labels, relationship, and interest.

*Table 36. Weibo: tweet and comment*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Category | Ref | Tweet and comment | Purpose |
| Sheer reader | P01 | P01 claimed that he just read and posted not many tweets.  P01 did not comment on celebrities’ blogs.  P01 made one or two words short comments when retweeting. |  |
| Purposeful variety commentator | P02 | **My articles**  **Comments about some current affairs:** I share some reports about current affairs, for example Xiaoyueyue Accident[[71]](#footnote-71). I tweet about my opinions on Sina Weibo.  **Comments on celebrities’ comments on current affairs**: “When they (celebrities I follow) post about his opinions on current affairs, I comment on their posts. Some aspects of their opinions are right but some are wrong. I make my comments based on theirs.”  **Expression of support for stars he follows: “**For example, when Singer Zhang Jie who I like tweets about when his new album comes out, I follow with I support you, wish you a big sale of the album.”  **Comments on some famous quotes tweeted or retweeted by stars**: “I would post how they (the quotes) affect me.” | I hope that people say no to apathy. People should lend a helping hand even when there might be a cost or something. I think everybody should help others without considering one’s own loss. |
| Self-expresser | P03 | He seldom wrote micro-blogs, only sometimes posted a few words or sentences **about his feelings.** |  |
| Self-expresser | P04 | Life and leisure: “any ideas, any interesting places to go, unhappy experience, anything.” “about my mood, going out, photos.” “I feel that it is inconvenient to chat on QQ, I will chat on Weibo if I do.” “invite my classmate to play or eat”. |  |
| Purposeful political commentator | P06 | “Life; comment on current issues, for example, North Korea stopped nuclear test exercises after receiving something from USA; and also about people’s welfare issues, for example to compare the sound children’s welfare in America with that in China when viewing a child beggar; to demonstrate the game playing among different countries through what is happening in Syria; North Korea is a shameless country that does not develop its own economy, but ask for money from other countries by nuclear threatening.”  The proportion between original tweets and retweets: 2:3  His comments are always of two or three sentences.  Comments on Liu Xiang’s five absences from Political Consultative Conference as a member of the CPPCC (Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference):  “Liu Xiang is an athlete. His major responsibility is training and winning honours for the country, not sleeping in conferences” “Politics in China is funny. It drags every famous person who has not become another country’s citizen to conference. Nonsense.”  Photos taken by himself or pictures searched and found online to match with words to make it more vivid.  An anti-Party demonstration in Hong Kong: “We were at Causeway Bay, Hong Kong at that moment. There was a huge contrast. On one side, it was the celebration of Hong Kong’s Return to China. On the other side, it was the demonstration. I felt so excited. I saw Hong Kong people who demanded general election and no interference of mainland Chinese government in the election of their Legislative Council, their power, and their demands. They have the environment and conditions to express what they really think and lots of participants are young students. I felt the power of democracy and I was inspired. And then I tweeted it on Weibo.” | Try to express and make a difference:  “There are things that I want to make my effort to change…but to make my contribution, to express my demands and also let my followers know my demands in a hope to make a difference.”  To attract following and retweeting:  “I hope to attract following and retweeting which brings me a sense of achievement.”  “To attract followers. Increasing number of followers gains me face (brings me honour).” |

Based on what they posted and commented and their purposes, the participants were grouped into four categories: sheer reader, variety commentator, self-expresser, and purposeful political commentator. P01 was a sheer reader who just read and hardly expressed himself or made any comment. P02 was a purposeful variety commentator who expressed his comments on a variety of topics. He had a purpose when commentating on some current affairs. P03 and P04 were self-expressers who just expressed their feelings, moods, and ideas; shared photos of their life; and chatted with close friends. P06 was a purposeful political commentator who posted comments on political content with a clear purpose to ‘make a difference’.

P06’s Sina Weibo experience of posting seems to confirm the finding of King, Pan and Roberts (2013; 2014). Various topics including criticism of the party-state and its policies are allowed on Sina Weibo, while content which ‘represents, reinforces, or spurs social mobilization’ is blocked.

*Table 37. Weibo: what do I retweet?*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Retweet | | | |
| General description | Frequently | Sometimes | Occasionally |
| P01 | Sina Weibo was a platform for P01 to frequently share what he read online. | videos and pictures, beautiful pictures, funny animated pictures that make people laugh, cartoons. | News on *South Weekly*, Sometimes the participant did not share what he read on news websites; sometimes he shared all he read. Approximately, he shared once out of two or three readings; information about MSC entrance examination. | Satirical social commentary pictures or cartoons. |
| P02 | Usually pictures or videos with words. |  | “News reports about current affairs and others’ comments: including international, national news, government corruption; usually not about military or government policies, only very occasionally when I am really concerned.” | Good articles from a literature website he visited, such as mini-novels, poems and prose. |
| P03 | “I only retweet certain things that interest me, such as news from Q pet game…. I have no interest in other things on Weibo and seldom use it.” |  |  | News from the official Weibo of Q Pet Game. |
| P04 | A great variety of things.  She only retweets about finance and economics on Weibo, not on other platforms. | Love, career, food and amusement in Chongqing, fashion street shoot, beautiful places with pictures, pretty dogs, interesting sentences. | | Very occasionally: finance and economics, Wang Lijun Incident, news about the increase in oil prices. |
| P06 | Others’ tweets and comments; posts from Facebook and Twitter; less words, more pictures and videos; pictures: videos 1:1; more music; domestic political news : international political news 2:1 : “dark side such as critiques of NPC & CPPCC (the National People's Congress and the Chinese Political Consultative Conference), forced demolition, city inspectors”; message to find persons whose blood type matches to save ill people. |  |  |  |

P03 was the only participant who retweeted only news from Q pet game. P01, P02, P04, and P06 all retweeted social and political news, but the frequency of retweeting such news is not as high as retweeting entertaining content. For P04, Sina Weibo is the only platform where she retweeted about finance and economics. For the four participants, they retweeted more pictures and videos than words on Weibo.

*Table 38. Weibo: who follows me?*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Follower |
| P01 | 138 followers: mainly strangers and one or two acquaintances. |
| P02 | Some classmates and strangers, total of only dozens of followers, |
| P03 | Close friends |
| P04 | More than 200, others are strangers except some closest friends. |
| P06 | More than 400 followers among whom about 100 acquaintances, about 10 closest friends.  QQ friends do not overlap with Weibo followers. There are totally less than 30 overlaps, 4 or 5 friends and those who went to concerts together.  People who have the same interests, many in music, some in sports, tennis.  About 10 couchsurfing friends.  QQ fans group in Chongqing. |

For the three participants whose followers exceeded a hundred, the majority of their followers were strangers. Even P02 who had only dozens of followers had strangers following him. P03 was the only participants who had only close friends following him. Compared with QQ and Renren, Sina Weibo is more of a public platform than a private platform to P01, P02, P04, and P06.

*Table 39. Weibo: why do I retweet?*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | For collection |
| P02 | Share to collect: “The posts on current affairs I share are not restricted to certain aspects. I share them when I feel like collecting them. There will be records when I share them so that I can keep them. It requires you to make comments when you share posts. A piece of news has its values. I will evaluate the core value of the news, comment on it and express my own opinions.” |
| P06 | The purpose of retweeting is “to save it for myself, to know.” |

Because there would be records when one shared something on Sina Weibo, two participants shared what they like as a way to collect it.

*Table 40. Weibo: who do I interact or converse with?*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Conversation and interaction | | |
| First step online | Who interacts with the participant | What they converse about |
| P06 | The first step online is to “log on to Weibo and check if there is interaction.” | Followers and readers of your comments (all strangers):  “Sometimes people will interact with you after reading your comments. Sometimes they support you, sometimes they do not. There are many opportunity of interaction on Weibo. Those who interact with you are those who follow you, or those see your comments following the original tweets. They express agreement or disagreement on your comments. They are all strangers.” | Music, politics:  “(We) chat about music most, sometimes express opinion about various political phenomena or say one or two sentences. For example, members of the People’s Congress sleep in the conference; the conference of the People’s Congress is the gathering of parents of Chinese overseas students. New current affairs in China are also discussed. There are lots of discussions about the problems in China on Weibo.”  Stars’ interaction with their fans. |

Only P06 reported interaction with his followers and readers of his comments on Sian Weibo.

To sum up, Weibo is more of a public platform than a private platform to the majority of the participants both in terms of their followers and the accounts they followed compared with the other two social networking applications: QQ and Renren. Sina Weibo is mainly a platform for entertainment, interest, and expression of feelings and life experience in terms of who and what they followed and what they generated and shared. However, they chose to expose themselves to a certain amount of social and political content and some purposefully made political comments and posted political content to make a difference. This is something they did not claim to do on any other Internet platform.

### 4.4.4 Between acquaintances and strangers

The study found evident difference between how participants communicate and interact with acquaintances and strangers online. Participants purposely used different platforms for communication and interaction with their acquaintances and strangers and they behaved differently on acquaintance-only platforms, stranger-only platforms, and mixed platforms. It demonstrates that social relationships in real life have evident influence on participants’ online behaviours, and anonymity to some extent frees participants from that influence.

*Table 41. Between acquaintances and strangers: channel*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Channel | | |
| For acquaintance | For stranger | For a mix |
| P01 | QQ | Sina Weibo | Renren, QQ group |
| P02 | QQ; Qzone |  | Weibo  QQ group |
| P03 | QQ, Qzone, Weibo |  | QQ group |
| P04 | QQ, Renren |  | Sina Weibo |
| P05 | QQ. Renren |  |  |
| P06 | QQ |  | Weibo, QQ group |

For all in-depth interview participants, QQ, or QQ contact to be specific, is a channel for acquaintances. Next to QQ contact are Qzone and Renren. To have a stranger-only platform is not common among the participants. The most popular mix channel is QQ group and next to it Weibo.

*Table 42. Between acquaintances and strangers: communication and interaction*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Communication and interaction | |
| With acquaintances | With strangers |
| P01 | “I concern about how people see me on a platform of acquaintances.”  “In the eyes of those who know me, I am a person who always takes a middle stance. I don’t want them to see me as an extremist.” | Almost no communication or interaction with strangers. “Occasionally when I have nothing else to do, I will politely answer a stranger with ‘hello’ and ‘what is your name?’ and then stop talking when finding out it’s a stranger.”  He occasionally posted extreme comments on the platform of strangers, but not insulting comments. |
| P02 |  | It depends if we have common topics. |
| P03 |  | It depends if we have common topics. |
| P04 | Chatting about what is going; invite to hang out | Almost no communication or interaction:  “Usually I do not add people known from the Internet, nor do I talk to them.” |
| P05 | Chatting |  |
| P06 | Chatting and sharing | Sharing, interaction |

It is common for the participants to share funny, entertaining, or interesting content on acquaintance, mixed and stranger platforms. At the same time, the people the participants connect to and the content they communicate on different platforms demonstrate that different platforms were employed for different people and thus different purposes. P01, P02, P04, P05 and P06 were explicit that the information flowing through interpersonal communication channels like QQ contact with acquaintances was different from that through stranger platforms like Weibo (see Tables 22, 25, 31, 36 & 37). They considered that some content was suitable for mixed or stranger platforms only (see Table 37, P04). They never or almost never shared them on acquaintance platforms (see Table 22 & 25).

It is evident that the participants had a clear mind as to what was acceptable or suitable for a certain group of people they were connected to online. The participants tended to discuss or communicate what was considered of common concern with the people they were talking to. They chatted with their acquaintances about what was going on with themselves such as trivial matters of their daily life, love, study, health, planning for events and so on (see Tables 22 & 31). In QQ groups, they discussed what was going on with the group like group events, issues of group interests (see Table 25). On stranger platforms, they shared what was going on with society, for example, their opinion of and information about social issues and current affairs (see Tables 36 & 37). The participants who had more strangers connected to them online (see Tables 24 & 32) tended to show more concern about group, social or public issues (see Tables 25, 36 & 37). Gender difference is also evident. P04 who had a comparatively large number of stranger followers on both Renren and Sina Weibo showed less concern about social or public issues than the male participants, like P01 and P06.

It is also evident that the relationship between the participants and the people they are connected to on a certain platform affects their behaviour on that platform (see Table 42, P01). P01 made it explicit that he was concerned about how people would see him on an acquaintance platform and tried to behave in a way that met their expectation on that platform. He occasionally behaved differently on his stranger platform.

P06 provided another explanation for why certain content was not shared on acquaintance platforms (see Table 25). He did not share information about ‘call for help to find matching blood for ill people’ in QQ groups because he thought that it would not help due to the limited number of people in QQ groups.

*Table 43. Between acquaintances and strangers: development of relationship*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Development of relationship | | |
| Further development with acquaintance | From stranger to online friend | From stranger to real life acquaintance |
| P01 | √ | QQ bicycling group | QQ bicycling group |
| P02 | √ | “Find students in this university who come from the same home town I came from through online alumni network and invite them to join a QQ group.” | Going out for dinner together and helping each other. |
| P03 | √ | Four from web-game playing together to QQ friends |  |
| P04 | √ |  |  |
| P05 | √ |  |  |
| P06 | √ | Music fans, couchsurfing friends. | Music fans, couchsurfing friends. |

All in-depth interview participants reported that they used the Internet for further development of relationships with their acquaintances. All male in-depth interview participants reported that they used the Internet to develop online friends from strangers. The strangers are those who share common interest like bicycling, web-games, music, or travelling, or those who come from the same home town. Three out of four participants who developed online friendships with strangers also furthered their relationships with online friends to become real life acquaintances. It is safe to conclude that the Internet is a tool for friendship consolidation and development.

With the Internet, everybody online is theoretically connected to anybody else online. That is one of the most important virtues of the Internet. It makes it possible for a person to encounter diverse experience, perspectives, and to be more innovative and successful in solving problems and be inspired by something different, exotic, and sometimes annoying at first glance (Zuckerman, 2014). It also makes it possible for a person to utilise natural, financial, or intellectual resources for their goals. However, Zuckerman (2014) argues that average Internet users just use it for connecting with those who are near and dear to them and seldom use it to encounter strangers or enjoy the diversity the Internet makes possible. I will now take a close look at how the participants used the Internet to connect with people who are strangers and people who are different from them.

The good side of the story is that four out of the six in-depth interview participants (the details of the focus group participants’ usage are unknown) used the Internet to connect to a number of strangers (see Tables 32 & 33) although for P02 that number is extremely small and for P01, P03, and P04 the interaction with strangers is rare. The most prominent problem is the lack of diversity. Most strangers whom P01 and P02 followed were celebrities and stars, economically or intellectually successful people., The strangers whom P04 and P06 followed are comparatively much more diverse in their identity, but they show some common interests with the participants. And P06 did benefit from his connection. He travelled to different cities (see Table 54), got inspiring experience in Hong Kong (see Table 36), and made profits by collecting music resources and information from different channels and selling them (see Table 95). It is important to note that those participants who did follow a great number of strangers, chose who to follow by their interests and they chose to follow strangers who share similar tastes and interest (see Table 35). There is not a single participant who claimed that they purposefully chose those who are different or who thought differently from them to experience something different or inspiring.

To conclude, the Internet provides the same possibility for everyone online. However, the extent that different users realise that possibility varies greatly and seldom does anyone realise its full potential. It is the people, the users of a technology, who make the possibility a utopian or reality. As to the participants studied, the author would love to see it in a positive light, as Benkler (2006) does, ‘much of their network use focuses on enhancing and deepening existing real-world relations, as well as adding new online relations’ (p.485).

## 4.5 University intranet and online forums

### 4.5.1 University Intranet

Most characteristics of university intranets are just like their Western counterparts. There is one characteristic that attracts great attention from scholars (e.g. Yang, 2003; MacKinnon, 2007; Li, 2010). University intranets in mainland China provide online forum services, or so-called Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) which are considered by Li (2010) as ‘a major type of online public space in China’ (p.63). The history of university BBS in China can be traced back to the era of telnet-based BBS from 1997 to 1998. Earlier university BBSs were established and operated by students utilising university resources and became popular as liberal BBS not only among students but also people from the general public. University BBSs are not only used for the spread of breaking news the authorities want to hold back and public discussion, but also for online protests, and organising offline protests (Yang, 2003b).

Despite enjoying a certain degree of freedom, university BBSs are in the control of the university and are censored (Yang, 2003b). 2004 and 2005 marks a turning point for the development of university BBSs in China. Before that there had not been any registration requirement for their users so that any person could post on university BBSs while remaining anonymous. Besides, ‘the Chinese universities and research institutions’ network is not under the direct rule of local government’ (Li, 2010, p.72). As a virtual public sphere for political debates and discussions, therefore, university and commercial BBSs enjoyed greater popularity across China than blogs even in 2005 (Guo, et al., 2005; Li, 2010). Due to the anonymity and numerous permeable holes of both technical and human censoring, sensitive content was posted and survived for hours and sometime days before it was discovered and filtered. It is long enough for any news to spread wide online and make much difference. Sometimes it becomes too late to block or suppress the spread of such news for enough people have already read it and begun their protest. It is for this reason that in 2004 the Chinese government launched a crackdown on the BBS which deepened throughout 2005 (MacKinnon, 2007, p.36). In 2005, the Ministry of Education ordered that external IPs should be banned from university BBSs. Starting from a popular BBS known as “SMTH,” hosted at Tsinghua University (China’s equivalent of MIT), a real name registration and a current-student-only policy have been enforced on university BBSs across China (Soong, 2005). Consequently, posting of sensitive content and public discussion has been moved to the newly born, but later rapidly rising, blogs whose potential as a public sphere and to be used by dissidents had not been realised by the government yet. Li (2010) argued that ‘university forums were reduced from a public place to an internal place for students’ social use’ as a result of the tightened control.

*Table 44. University Intranet: participants as audience*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Communicator | Message | Channel | Motivation | Frequency |
| P01 | Registered users (restricted to university staff and students) | **What I read:**  Depend on what information I need;  **Study:** Information about certificate examination registration; information gathered by students from the Internet, including information about telecommunication networks, what our university is strong at;  **Life:** Second-hand market; rent information;  Top ten topics in the forum;  Pictures;  Information relevant to our course, our university or us university students; (Example: an article about the Mayor’s opinion about high Internet fees in universities);  What the university releases;  What schoolmates post, for example, what happened in a certain university canteen; unqualified food; complaints about the university (usually trivial matters),  What happened on campus. | Campus BBS (online forum);  University news (a column on campus BBS;  University Online Learning Environment. | Surf to **kill boring time**;  **Surveillance:** Want to know. | Very frequently; several times a day; whenever there is nothing to do on the computer. |
|  | **What I do not read:**  Information about technologies in our field;  What is irrelevant to me,  National news. |  | Not interested |  |
| P02 | University staff and students | Lots of complaints about the problems in the university; part-time job; house renting; events advertising; second-hand market. | Campus BBS | **Surveillance:** To know about the university before registration. Complaints on BBS truthfully reflect the bad sides of the university.  **Effect of complaints on BBS**: to bridge communication between the university and its students, to reduce contradictions between them. | Use it before registration and when as a fresh student, do not use afterward |
| What is not posted on campus BBS: the problem of teaching quality. | Too many people will know |  |
| A platform for students to evaluate the teaching of their teacher with certain standards. | Score your teachers platform. | P02 thinks the standards are not personalised. There could not be unified standards to measure a teacher. The scores show the quality of teaching as well as students’ feelings. |  |
| Comments on excellent teachers and students; materials and resources downloaded from the Internet; music; university news and information. | University Online Learning Environment; Nanshan Literature Association; BTdownload; Chanel Music; University microblog; Hongyan university online; and excellent teachers and students election platform. | **P2 speaks highly of his university’s intranet. He thinks it's a good platform for communication between the university and its students, and also a good education platform with good resources for study.** |  |
| P03 | University staff and students | **Mainly:** What was happening in the university such as what happened in the university canteens and a small dispute in a news-stand and reports about problems like accommodation bills. No complaints or reports about teaching or administrative problems, students comments  **Others:** part-time job; house renting; selling, communication among students from the same home towns. | Campus BBS | **Surveillance**: As a fresh student, to know the university from what other students post online.  “To be aware of what is going on around me.”  P3 believes what is posted on campus BBS is highly trustworthy because this is what they experienced.  A belief that online public deliberation influenced the discussion-making process in a university. Although he did not really know what happened after but he believed that some posts had positive influence.  He also believed that BBS shorted the distance between the university administrative staff and the students.  P3 also speaks highly of CQUPT intranet. | More frequently when he was a freshman. Then just several times a semester. |
| University | Information from the university, teaching achievements exhibition | University Online Learning Environment |
| P04 |  |  |  |  | Never used |
| P05 |  | Movie (mainly); CCTV Channel 1 & 9, CNN (seldom) | Network broadcasting |  | Mainly for movies, occasionally watches other programmes |
| University staff and students | What happened on campus, something entertaining, information about lectures | Forum and news |  | Seldom |
|  |  | Online library |  |  |
| P08 | University staff and students | Movie | Bitdownload | **Convenience:** Updating fast and easy to find |  |
|  | Mathematics | Online library | For **study** | Sometimes |

Most of the participants reported their use of university intranet as audience. There are three categories of message the participants sought on the university intranet: information about and around the university, study, and entertainment. University BBS was a major platform for the participants to learn information about their universities. P01 explicitly mentioned that he did not read national news on university intranet. It seems that the university intranet has been reduced to an internal place as Li (2010) argued, but not only for social use.

Chinese university intranets provide three unique services: BBS, Bitdownload, and ideology education service. Bitdownload is a peer-to-peer platform for registered users to share resources. The majority of what is shared is just movies, videos, and study resources that are ‘politically safe’. The advantage is that it is fast and free. Politically sensitive content is also shared on this platform. For example, the researcher once downloaded a banned documentary from Bitdownload. The ‘politically and intellectually challenging’ documentary (Zhao, 2008, p.86) named *River Elegy* (*Heshang*,《河殇》in Chinese), was aired by China Central Television (CCTV), a vice-ministerial level government institution, in 1988. The documentary harshly criticises the Chinese civilisation and suggests that China should learn from Western civilisation. The documentary as an enlightenment was believed by some critics to play an essential part in bringing about the Tiananmen Square protest of 1989. The Party and their ideological educators in university know well the power of the Internet and how to use it and to conduct ideological education has been a major topic of Internet research and practice in China (Qiu & Bu, 2013). The three universities studied all provided ideological education services on their intranet. However, the ideological education services were not reported to be used by the participants.

Their motivations to use the university intranet are classified into four categories: surveillance, study, convenience, and time-killing. The most important motivation found is surveillance including to know the university and to be aware of what is going on around them. It has been found that university intranet, especially its BBS, became an important platform for some participants to learn about a university and for students, administrative staff and teachers to communicate with each other. According to P02, BBS has become not only a platform for current students, especially the newcomers, to learn about their environment, but also a source of information for the would-be students to ‘know about the university before registration’ because he believed that ‘complaints on BBS truthfully reflected the bad sides of the university’. It means that university BBS has the potential to influence people’s choice of which university to go to for higher education and the communicators who make the difference are university staff and mainly the current students. In such a sense, university BBS empowers the current students and the staff. In addition, P03 believed that ‘online public deliberation influenced the discussion-making process in a university’. Although he did not really know what happened after, he believed that some posts had positive influence.

What has been found about the frequency of usage demonstrates an evident difference between male and female participants in university usage. P04 never used her university intranet. Both P05 and P08 reported utilising their university intranet mainly for movies, occasionally or sometimes for study. P05 seldom used it for surveillance while P08 did not mention any such usage. Three male participants reported usage of university intranet for surveillance. But only P01 still used it very frequently then. P02 and P03 only used it for surveillance frequently as would-be students or fresh students and they only used it occasionally after they knew better the environment and their intent to surveil weakened.

*Table 45. University Intranet: participants as communicators*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Message | Channel | Why | Frequency |
| P01 | Comments “on something I know.” | Campus BBS |  | Perhaps sometimes |
| P02 | Sharing of news about university events. | University microblog |  | Occasionally |
| P03 |  |  | Just to know what is happening. | Just read, no comments |
| P05 | Did not report problems through the Intranet. |  | I have not encountered any big problem at all. | Never |

The usage as communicators was neither common nor frequent.

### 4.5.2 Online forums

BBSs and online forums or communities are interchangeable terms in China. Online forums have never been on the list of the most popular Internet services in China (CNNIC, 1997-2013). Their best time was in 2006 when it ranked 4th in the list of Internet users’ most frequently used Internet services next to news reading, search engines, and emails. 43.2% of Internet users reported using online forums most frequently. Usually, it ranked from 7th to 9th in the list of the most frequently used Internet services in the early 2000s. Since 2009, it began to fall out of the top ten in terms of penetration rate. The latest report of CNNIC in 2013 demonstrates that it is now the last of 17 Internet services with a penetration rate of 19.5%. Moreover, online forums are subject to government control. BBSs are required to ‘record user information for at least 60 days to facilitate police work’ (Qiu, 2003, p.11). Like most sites operating in China, BBSs and online forums or communities police themselves to stay out of trouble (Abbott, 2001). Therefore, scholars like Harwit and Clark (2001) suggested that online forums were contributing little to the development of Chinese civil society.

Despite limited popularity and government control, however, online forums had been a central topic in the heated debate about the democratic potential or the political implications of the Internet in China before blogs took their place in the late 2000s (MacKinnon, 2007). And its users believe that the forum and the Internet in general is a freer space for public discussion of national affairs, and expression of their opinions, concerns and complaints (Yang, 2003a). Featured by publicity and long-lasting content, online forums are distinct from other Internet services like QQ, microblog, etc. Guo (2005) believed that online forums had ‘the most influence’ thanks to their long-lasting content, despite their relatively low popularity.

Online forums serve as a public sphere for Internet users to express and exchange their political ideas, for wide-ranging political discussions with unlike thinkers, for articulation of social problems, and for supervising the government and public affairs, and as virtual communities for the development of civil society (Yang, 2003a; Yang, 2003b; Soong, 2005). According to Yang (2003b), there exist thousands of active online forums in China. He argued that the degree of control and censorship varied from forum to forum and discussion on a wide range of topics was lively on popular forums due to both the hosts’ intent to gain popularity and the users’ counter-control strategies to circumvent key-word filtering. Ironically, even the Strong State Forum of the *People’s Daily*, one of the leading official newspapers of the Chinese government, is utilised by Internet users for political debates (Qiu, 2003). Thanks to the ‘sheer volume of postings on large sites’ and the post-manner of manual censoring, politically sensitive information and opinion could often survive on online forums ‘for hours and sometimes even days before it is discovered and taken down’ (MacKinnon, 2007, p.36). Moreover, Yang (2003b), asserted that ‘online publics have proliferated along with online forums’ (p.461). In addition, online forums are utilised by groups like Huaxia Zhiqing (the Chinese Educated Youth) to create virtual communities for social interaction, personal expression, mutual help, political debate, artistic expression, online publishing, organising online and offline activities, and more (Yang, 2003a). Zhiqing (the Educated Youth) is a special term in China. It refers to the urban youth who were sent or forced to the countryside to become peasants or to build farms from the early 1950s to the end of the Cultural Revolution.

However, some scholars argue that online forums, especial those of official websites, have been utilised by the CPC to legitimise its own claim to power or used for diplomatic tactics (Weiss, 2014) with countries like Japan and the United States, by mobilising nationalism. The Strong State Forum of the *People’s Daily* is a hotbed of nationalist fervour (Hughes, 2002; Kalathil, 2003). In September 1996, Peking University’s Untitled BBS Station coordinated the first web-based grassroots nationalism protest. It was against Japanese occupation of Daioyu Island (Qiu, 2003). Other such protests in which online forums played a part include demonstrations targeting Indonesia (summer 1998), NATO (May 1999), Taiwan (July 1999), Japan (January 2000 and February-March 2001), and the United States (April-May 2001). Online forums acted as a public place for heated discussion and mobilisation when a triggering event happened (Qiu, 2003). However, employment of nationalism is a dangerous game. The party-state runs the risks of looking weak in its diplomacy and looking unpatriotic when suppressing nationalist protests, which undermines its legitimacy (Weiss, 2014). Moreover, Weiss (2014) argues that nationalism mobilisation may lay the foundation of other social mobilisation which the party-state fears most. The organisers and participants of nationalism mobilisation practice the skills and accumulate the experiences needed for social mobilisation. In addition, it gives birth to such autonomous organisers and organisations.

Caution is needed when researchers interpret their results of content or discourse analysis of online forum contents. For example, Yang’s (2003a) assertion of users’ belief in the freedom of the online forum came from an analysis of the discourse in the Strong State Forum. It is because that full-time cyber-police and part-time state information security liaison personnel are not only employed to filter out the undesirable content, but also to post content favourable to the Chinese government and to make it look like a free public sphere. On 20th June 2008, President Hu Jintao communicated with the Strong State Forum’s users for several minutes. Such a symbolic communication sent out two messages. Firstly, the Chinese government recognised the political importance of online forums. Secondly, the Chinese government has been strategically utilising the online forum to increase its legitimacy.

Thirdly, scholars like Leibold (2011) argue that equipped with a freer space, Chinese forum users employ them mainly for discussing matters of common interest and for sharing life experiences rather than meaningful political debate. In addition, users tend to misuse their online freedom for whispers or ‘verbal violence’ instead of critical or rational discourse (Leibold, 2011). Survey evidence demonstrates that only 11% of surveyed participants considered information on online forums as reliable compared with three-quarters on government websites (Guo, 2007, pp.9-11).

Baidu Tieba is one of the most popular online forums or communities in China. It is based on the notion of bringing like-minded people together to communicate with and help each other on a topic of common interest through key word search. Any registered user can search with a key word the topic he or she is interested in. if such a forum, or so-called bar, has not been established and then a forum named by that key word is automatically set up. ‘Once the bar is created, it will become searchable within the Baidu Tieba’ (Yip, 2010, p.38). As a result, on its website (http://tieba.baidu.com/) it claims that it has 8,192,794 topic-based forums when the author is consulting its website on 10th May, 2014. Liyi Bar, one of its most popular bars, has 10,184,593 visits and 421,951,261 posts.

Democracy needs not only freedom of speech, but also constant exposure to competing ideas (Sunstein, 2009). Such an interest-based model of communication and interaction is criticised for fragmentising and localising Chinese society as a self-aggregating “hive mind” and “cloistered cocoons of cognitive consonance” (Lanier, 2006; Lawrence, et al., 2010, p.152). Leibold (2011) argued that ‘the ease with which individuals can create their own fragmented speech markets and interest-based communities encourages misinformation, group polarisation, and extremist thoughts and actions’ (p.13).

*Table 46. Online forum: topic, purpose and participant’s contribution*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Topic | Purpose | Participant’s contribution |
| P01 | **Study:** MSC entrance examination | To investigate why others want to do master’s course;  To collect (learning) materials. |  |
| **Hobbies:** An online hiking forum;  Youth Hotels Association China (http://www.yhachina.com/bbs/ ). | Wants to travel or go out | Participated in no activities |
| **Hobbies:** A Chongqing-based online local bicycling forum (<http://www.717c.com/>):  Prices of bicycle accessories and bicycles, especially second-hand;  Bicycling blogs (words and pictures: beautiful sceneries, routes, restaurants and hotels recommendation, posts of bicycling activities);  Reports about local bicycling events.  It seems that the forum has lots of members. They are people in Chongqing.  “The participants are people with incomes and older than me.” “I felt I did not belong to them.”  “I once met two of the members. They were newly graduated and about 30 years old.” | Wanted to buy a second-hand bike for bicycling because of limited budget;  Found the forum by searching online. |  |
| P02 | **Hobbies:** Information about digital products, especially mobile phones | To seek information about digital products;  To seek answers or solutions to the questions or problems of his digital products. | Vote to support the post, if the message is helpful. |
| P03 | **Hobbies:** Web-games; things to make people laugh; digital products; nothing serious |  |  |
| P06 | **Hobbies:** 58 city community[[72]](#footnote-72) (<http://cq.58.com/>): information about second hand commodities, part-time jobs, travelling together, local group of Chinese Li Wen fans (about dining or KTV together) | Have a look | Going to hang out together |
|  | Baidu Tieba: The same with Weibo. “I post the same content on two platforms” | To attract followers |  |
| P07 | **Study:** Specialised websites and forums:  Information about functions and offered prices of computer hardware and software, and servers;  Information about applications in her field; [www.pconline.com.cn](http://www.pconline.com.cn/)[[73]](#footnote-73)  [www.zol.com.cn](http://www.zol.com.cn/)[[74]](#footnote-74)  Searching for information about, download and upload codes; <http://www.csdn.net/>[[75]](#footnote-75) (an online IT community in Chinese)  Discussion on hot and difficult issues in her area. | To search for or learn information in her field, to share codes | Upload codes |
|  | Tianya: a popular Chinese online forum |  |  |

The online forums that participants used concentrate on two topics: hobbies and study. The purpose of utilising online forums is usually to search for or learn information in a specialised area. Participants did not only visit the forums, but also made contributions by voting to support useful posts, participating in activities, or posting useful content. Participants did not report using online forums for public debate or mobilisation that has been much discussed academically. Their usage was interest-based and leisure-and-study oriented as argued by Leibold (2011).

*Table 47. Online forum: topic, number, and effect*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Topic | Number | Effect |
| P01 | **Study:** MSC entrance examination | Two |  |
| **Hobbies:** A online hiking forum | Collect many such forums, but visit a few of them |  |
| **Hobbies:** A Chongqing-based online local bicycling forum (<http://www.717c.com/>) |  | “I want to go travelling after reading their blogs.” |
| P02 | **Hobbies:** Information about digital products, especially mobile phones | One is [www.zol.com.cn](http://www.zol.com.cn/)[[76]](#footnote-76) |  |
| P03 | **Hobbies:** Web-games; things to make people laugh; digital products; nothing serious |  |  |
| P06 | **Hobbies:** 58 city community[[77]](#footnote-77) (<http://cq.58.com/>) | One |  |
| **Hobbies:** Baidu Tieba | One | Someone will follow your posts and make comments. Downloading |
| P07 | **Study:** Specialised websites and forums | Several |  |
|  | Tianya |  |  |

P01’s understanding of the effect of visiting a bicycling forum adds a perspective to better understand the effect of entertainment and life content online. He believed that reading travel blogs made their readers want to go travelling.

## 4.6 Online and offline political participation, participation, and volunteering

Political participation, online political participation and offline participation are defined in Chapter 2. Online participation includes participating in any activity or joining any organisation online. Online volunteering refers to usage of the Internet to search for information about volunteering, join volunteering organisations, or participate in volunteering activities.

*Table 48. Report problems or make suggestion to government online*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Report problems or make suggestion to government online |
| P02 | No:  When asked if he reported problems or made suggestion through online government platforms like email, P2 said no. “There is no such a platform. I have never done it”. However, he added that he walked into his principal’s office to report a safety issue when in senior higher school.  When asked if he would report problems or make suggestion to the central or local government, he answered probably not. “I feel completely in the dark. Where should I send my letter if I want to? I don’t know. I have never thought about to do it.” |
| P03 | No:  “There is the mayor online mailbox. But I have never used it. I think that Chongqing is good.” “People,com.cn has prime minister (online). I am not sure.” |
| P05 | No:  No interest: “I said that my Internet use is determined by my interest. I have never thought about to care about such an aspect (using electronic government platform).” |
| P06 | Never will, never did |

No participant reported that they had reported problems or made any suggestion to government through the Internet, although the Chinese government started the Government Online Project on 22 January 1999 and provides channels like the mayor online mailbox and the prime minister (online). P03 reported that he knew about the mayor online mailbox and had a vague idea about the prime minister (online), he ‘has never used them’ because he ‘thinks that Chongqing is good’. It indicates that one possible reason for P03’s non-participation is his content with his current life.

*Table 49. Participation in political activities or organisations through the Internet*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Participation in political activities or organisations through the Internet | | | |
| P02 | No: (when asked if he has joined organisations or participated in activities through the Internet)  “Almost not. …There are a very few activities organised online, or I know a few. Because, on the one hand, if there are many, they are held in places far from here. There are relatively few because of Chongqing’s location. There are relatively a few activities that we are capable of doing.” | | | |
| P03 | No:  “There are some pubic benefit activities online. I have read about some. But they are far away and I cannot make it.” | | | |
| P04 | When asked about her opinion about activities online to express support for promoting solution of some social problems, she answered, “I have not cared much about it.” | | | |
| P06 | Channel | Activity | Motivation | Frequency |
| Sina Weibo: Only the voters can see the results of voting. It is not publicised. | Online petition (voting):  “I will vote if I see some issues I know or I am interested. The issued I voted include Guizhentang live bear bile extracting, homeless dogs, homeless children, the singing ‘red’ songs campaign in Chongqing.” | To make a difference:  “It may make some changes if I make my contribution, for example, to live bear bile extracting or homeless dogs. There may be possibility to change through expressing what I think.” | 5 or 6 times in recent one or two weeks, usually once a week or two weeks. |
|  | Search for volunteering opportunities online |  | No |

P06 reported one online political activity: Sina Weibo’s online petition. Sina Weibo provides a microblogging petition service through which its users can sign up for petitions on various topics and the petitions occur very frequently. The singing ‘red’ songs campaign, or so-called ‘mass sing-alongs of communist anthems’, reported by P06, is one of the two famous issues that gained Bo Xilai nationwide prominence. It is a controversial musical campaign to mark the 90th anniversary of the Communist Party's birth in Chongqing launched by Bo Xilai in 2008. The campaign was criticised by the Western media as Chinese city's new cultural revolution (Branigan, 2011; FlorCruz, 2011). The other one is an anti-mafia crusade (Morillo, 2012).

The researcher asked the in-depth interview participants if they have joined any organisation or participated in any activity through the Internet when they have not brought the topic into their conversation. The researcher deliberately avoided using the word ‘political’ to modify activities and organisation for fear of misleading the participants and missing important information that the participants did not consider as political. To the question, P02, P03, and P04 all gave a negative answer. P02 tried to explain and legitimise his non-participation. From his explanation, it is clear that he had hardly paid any attention to such organisations or activities.

*Table 50. Participation in the local people’s congress election (supposed)*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Participation in the local *people’s congress* election (supposed) |
| P05 | The possibility is low: lack of reliable information  “There is a certain degree of possibility, but it is low. At first, to elect a representative at the people’s congress, I know nothing about the candidates. Nothing. Unless I happened to know them well.” “If I know them by person. Because information online is complex. Some is real, some is false, some is bad, and some is good. If you need to know somebody to tell if he/she can be a representative, I cannot trust online information that much. Of course, there are some I can trust, but not that much. Unless I really know what he/she did, the possibility will be higher. For example, we participated in the people’s congress election in our university. But we knew nothing about them. There are just posters to say who he/she is. But I had to vote. We were not willing to do so.” |
| P06 | Will do only when there is enough information about the candidates:  “If I am going to elect representatives, I need to know their political philosophies, their appeals, and their plans when in power. In China I will not vote, (because) I do not know who is who, what their political ideas are, what their measures are, or what their proposals are. I think that such an election is a shame to democracy. I will if this information is publicised. If they hold conferences to express their political ideas and someone’s political orientation and ideas are in line with my demands, I will. I will not, if suddenly one day someone tells me to take my ID to vote for our representative. And I indeed did not vote.” |
|
|

Article 2 in Chapter I General Principles of the *Constitution of the People's Republic of China* says that ‘all power in the People’s Republic of China belongs to the people. The National People’s Congress and the local people’s congresses at various levels are the organs through which the people exercise state power’ (Constitution, 2004). Article 57 of Section 1 of The National People's Congress, in Chapter III The Structure of the State says ‘the National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China is the highest organ of state power’. How are the National People’s Congress and the local people’s congresses constituted? Article III says ‘the State organs of the People’s Republic of China apply the principle of democratic centralism. The National People’s Congress and the local people’s congresses at various levels are constituted through democratic elections’. The principle of democratic centralism[[78]](#footnote-78) means that the representatives at a higher level are not directly elected by the people, but by the representative at a lower level.

Democratic elections of local people’s congress members do exist in China as P05 and P06 reported and as the researcher experienced. In most cases, people have to choose from a list of names when they have not a single idea of who they are. According to their accounts, they were both clear how important reliable information was to make the people’s congress election democratic and meaningful. Their realisation of the importance of reliable information came from their experience of the people’s congress election in their university. To make the situation worse, voters like P05, P06 and the researcher do not know if their votes count due to the lack of transparency. It is evident that P05 and P06 thought that the current people’s congress election was not democratic due to the lack of reliable information about the candidates. Only when reliable information was available were they willing to participate in such elections.

*Table 51. Online participation*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Channel | Activity | Organisation | Motivation | Frequency |
| P01 | QQ group | Bicycling together |  | To have companions to go bicycling together | Several times per semester |
| P04 |  | Negative:  “I have not participated in any activities online. Nor do I trust any activities online.” |  |  | Never |
| P05 | Heard of it | Gele Mountain climbing | A group |  | Never |
| P06 | QQ, online forums | Travel, short distance trips, hanging out together, going to concerts together, receiving stars at the airport together | Fan groups |  | Frequently |

Only P01 and P06 reported having participated in organisations and activities through the Internet.

*Table 52. Online volunteering*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Information | Organisation | Activity | Why |
| P01 | Know it from a classmate;  Find it online. | Volunteering website on probably voluntary jobs | Never attended one and forget about it. |  |
| P05 | Haven’t looked for it: “There should be, but we do not know. We haven’t looked for it. I remember that there is volunteering teaching or something.” |  |  | Lack of opportunity and lack of motivation: “To be frank, we, university students, all want to do some volunteering work. It is a practice for us and also helps others. But there are not many opportunities. I lack the real motivation to look for it. If there is an opportunity available and ask me to do it, I will. There is not much chance that I will look for opportunities myself.” |

Online volunteering is found to be uncommon among the participants. Only P01 and P05 mentioned using the Internet for volunteering. The findings demonstrate that neither of them were motivated enough to take real actions.

*Table 53. Offline volunteering and participation*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Channel | Activity | Organisation | Frequency | Understanding | Effect |
| P05 | University | Going to the countryside programme |  | Heard of it, but do not know what it is | A very few opportunities and confined to certain groups of people.  “I think sometimes (volunteering activities) are confined to certain groups of people. We do not know.”  “Till now there was one that I had a direct experience. It was volunteering work in a nursing home organised by our college. Volunteers were chosen. I was not chosen. They did not choose me to do it. There are a very few other volunteering work.” |  |
| Volunteering work in a nursing home | Our college | Volunteered, but was not chosen |  |
| Round table conference volunteering work |  | Knew it has recruited volunteers in our college |  |
| P06 | University | Registered but not assigned any work |  |  |  |  |

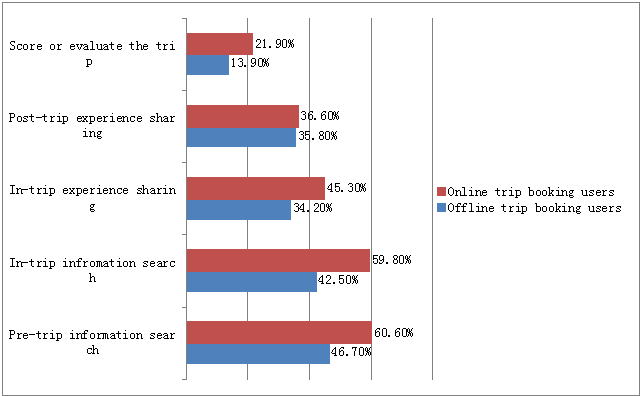
There is not any participant who has reported any offline participation or volunteering. Only P05 and P06 talked about their offline experience of volunteering and participation. The volunteering activities they both mentioned were all organised on campus. Going to the countryside programme is a programme under which officials, doctors, scientist and college students go to the countryside to spread scientific and literacy knowledge and offer medical service to farmers.

## 4.7 Online travelling and movies

### 4.7.1 Online travelling

The usage rate of online flight, hotel, train, or travel booking services increased from 19.8% to 29.3% from 2012 to 2013with approximately 181 million users (CNNIC, 2013). In 2013, 35.3% of Internet users use PCs to search for trip or travel information, while 31.7% use mobile phones. To meet the growing need, several leading search engine companies like Baidu developed travel channels. The increasing GDP per capita is one of the major reasons contributing to the growing need for travelling.

*Figure 5. Usages of mobile intelligent terminals for trip*



*Source: CNNIC*

It is evident that a noticeable percentage of both offline and online trip booking users utilise the Internet for trip information searching, experience sharing, and trip service evaluation. Travel was one of the favourite topics for the Chinese blogosphere (Pang, 2009; Leibold, 2011), online forums (Yang, 2003b), and social media (Zeng, et al., 2013).

Despite the growing popularity of using the Internet for travel, its social or political implications have hardly been studied. Several studies surveyed or compared Internet use for travel information in China (e.g. Harwit & Clark, 2001; Guo, 2005; 2007). Zeng, et al. (2013) suggested one way that travel information on social network websites might influence governments’ decision-making. Their study indicates that user generated content of private concern may be utilised to help the government improve their service for its people. Naduvath (2009) suggested that international travel as one of the cross-cultural linkages led to ‘exchange of ideas’ and enhanced ‘access to and appreciation of alternate viewpoints’ (p.122). Qiu, Lin and Leung (2012) found that Chinese exchange students in Singapore share two types of information with their friends in China on Renren: status updates and useful information. They considered that travel information was useful information and sharing it with friends was behaviour to benefit others. Although they did not elaborate on how it benefits others. The researcher argues that consumption of travel information also exposes Internet users to alternate cultures and thus appreciation of alternate viewpoints.

*Table 54. Online travelling*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Channel | Message | Activity | Motivation | Frequency |
| P05 | Baidu | To search first with Budai which leads me to Douban | Mutually beneficial (volunteering work for free travelling): “There are usually several options if you do such voluntary work. First cleaner,…cook, receptionist, usually three.” “In exchange, they provide free meals and accommodation, also arrange some time for you to look around, and tell you how to save money.”  Youth Hotel Association has more foreign guests. | To travel and practice English with limited budget. |  |
| Douban | Douban groups like Lijiang volunteering, Lijiang angel. Information about recruiting volunteers. | Occasionally |
| Tianya | Blogs of their volunteering experience. “For example, some volunteers post their blogs of their volunteering. To have a rough idea of which one is better, what activities they have.” | Started to use recently |
| P06 | 58 City Community | Call for tour pals to travel together or hang out together | Trip to Golden Buddha Mountain and Tibet, dining or KTV together |  | Long distance travelling twice; hanging out (more in the last year and the year before). |
| Couchsurfing friends: Known from Travelling website, Baidu Tieba; further known by QQ |  | First meeting at Carey’s concert, travelling to ShenZhen, Beijing, Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Tieling, and couchsurfing friends at Shenzheng and Beijing visited him in Chongqing. | To travel in an economical way:  “Because it costs less to travel this way. I like to travel around.” |  |
| QQ group of Liwen fans in Chongqing |  | Trips within Chongqing |  |  |

The Internet has been utilised by P05 and P06 in various ways for economical travelling. Three Internet services have been employed for online travelling: online forums and communities like Douban, Tianya, 58 City Community, and Baidu Tieba; search engines like Baidu; and QQ. Search engines are used at the first stage to search relevant information when P05 only had a rough idea of what she was going to do. Online forums and communities are for detailed information usually from Internet users who have relevant experience and for organising activities, for example to ‘call for tour pals to travel together or hang out together’. QQ is employed for development of further relationships.

It has been found that there were three types of travelling activities available online for Internet users like them. One is offered by some hotels who call for volunteers to help with service work like cleaning, cooking, or receiving guests and provide free meals and accommodation, some time for looking around, and tips to save money in exchange. The second is tour pal calling. Internet users call for tour pals to travel or hang out together through online forums and communities or QQ groups. The third is couchsurfing friends. There are specialised online forums and communities where Internet users can find people who are willing to host each other while travelling to each other’s hometowns. The three ways of online travelling all provide opportunities to travel with limited budget, which motivates P05 and P06 to travel or plan for travelling in such ways.

### 4.7.2 Online movies

By the end of 2013, the number of Internet users who watch videos online has reached approximately 428 million and the usage rate is 69.3% with 15.2% increase since 2012 (CNNIC, 2013). Guo’s two surveys (2005; 2007) also confirm that downloading and watching movies is heavily used. However, the political implications of movie watching have hardly been studied. The Chinese government has fully recognised the potential of online movies to challenge the existing values and the system while the scholars largely ignore this aspect. Zittrain and Edelman (2003) found that the movie Deep Impact together with other music, MTV and entertainment sites was blocked in China.

In McCormick, Su and Xiao’s (1992) study of the 1989 Democracy Movement, availability of foreign television series and movies was considered as a factor that contributed to challenging the Party’s traditional views and emergence of new ways of thinking. Movies are also considered as one of the sources from which the images that we use to fabricate pseudo-reality come (Joe, 2002). Pseudo-reality is an important concept Lippmann proposed to explain the influence of the media on how people define the world. The pseudo-reality the media and other people produce is important for all people to define the world since people experience most aspects of reality second-handedly from media and other people (Joe, 2002).

Young Chinese Internet users favour ‘high-quality’ entertainment/educational products produced by international media companies like Disney and Viacom. Their products are not considered as political or ideologically ‘harmful’ by the Chinese government because the companies intentionally meet government regulations on culturally sensitive content in order to secure their market share in China (Ian & Lu, 2007).

*Table 55. Online movies：channel, content and frequency*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Channel | Content | Frequency |
| P02 |  |  | About every two days |
| P04 | PPS, Sohu, Iqiyi, Tudou, and Youku | Variety shows: entertaining programmes like Happy Camp and Kangxicome;  TV series: modern Chinese TV series about young couples’ family life, Cantonese TV series and American TV series like Prison Break, Gossip Girls, The Vampire Diaries, Desperate Housewives, Ugly Betty, and The Big Bang Theory. | Frequently |
| P05 | University intranet | “English TV or movies when I want to practice English listening like Desperate House Wives and a movie about an investigation of nuclear weapons in Iraq by the FBI; sometimes some entertaining Chinese TV or movies; the latest and hottest if interesting; the classic and the latest; *The Sent Down Girl,* a movie in the context of the Culture Revolution blocked in China; I like detective films, especially spy films.” | Sometimes one movie per two or three days, sometimes per week, sometimes several in one day |
| P06 | Download online from domestic websites | The Hollywood blockbusters |  |
| P07 |  |  | Mentioned watching videos online |
| P08 | University intranet (bitdownload) |  |  |
| P09 | Blocked websites | Blocked movies |  |
| P11 |  | Movies, sit-coms, TV programmes | Frequently |
| P12 |  |  | Mentioned watching movies online |

*Table 56. Online movies: habit and effect*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Habit | Effect |
| P02 | “I like movies recommended by others. For example if I receive several movies at a time, I will file them and have a watch every two days.” |  |
| P04 | Likes TV series and variety shows;  Usually the latest series;  Likes TV about modern life, not ancient times. “I don’t like ancient clothes, nor fights in the court in ancient times. I don’t think it is interesting.”  “I like handsome men and beautiful women, a feast for eyes.” |  |
| P05 | Purposeful watching: “Usually I watch films and movies purposefully. When I want to practice my oral and listening English, I watch American films. Of course, sometimes it is an excuse. When I just want to entertain myself, I watch Chinese ones, entertaining ones. Sometimes when there are new series or movies, I will have a look if I am interested in them.” | **The effect on values:** American films’ potential impact: “I want to say that the impact is potential. I cannot tell, but I think that there is an impact on values.” Child education: She gave an example of how an American mother reacted to her crying baby. “I will pay attention to that when I educate my baby in the future. Impact like this. It is just an example.”  **Longing for a better life:** “There is certainly a longing for their living environment. …that is to say, when I watch their life, I probably may think that I could live such a life in the future. But I would not think that my current situation is not good compared with theirs.” “Just learn a few things here and there. But I cannot catch the main values (because of cultural differences).”  **Better knowledge and understanding of historical and current political affairs:**  Iraq war: “I learned something. …to some extent, the movie reveals the nature of Iraq War. It could be said that the movie helps to expand my knowledge.”  Blocked Chinese movie: “*The Sent Down Girl*, a blocked movie. It is about the Cultural Revolution…it has an impact on one’s mind.” |
| P11 |  | For her study |

P05’s accounts throw light on three important effects of online movie watching that have rarely been studied. They are the effect on values, longing for a better life, and better knowledge and understanding of historical and current political affairs.

## 4.8 Climbing over the Great Wall, Twitter, and Facebook

### 4.8.1 Climbing over the Great Wall

*Table 57. Climbing over the Great Wall I*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Who climbs over the Great Wall | How I know them | What I do it for |
| P06 | Democracy lover, film watcher, fan, teacher and professional:  “Climbing over the Great Wall is common among people I know. Those I know are usually democracy lovers (those who hold a strong preference of democracy over authoritarian regime). I feel that they are crazy about democracy. There are also students like us who climb over the Great Wall to watch films, follow stars, and read politics. I do the three. There are teachers and professionals who climb over to collect academic resources. But among the peers around me, there is hardly anybody who I know is a climber.” | Through Sina Weibo and Baidu tieba | Watch films, follow stars and friends studying abroad, buy and sell music CDs, and read politics |
| P07 | A friend | “A friend recommended it to me” | “(I) Viewed a blocked webpage, (and was) shocked by the information that was completely different from what I have learned within the Great Wall.” She claimed that she could not recall what the webpage or the content was. |
| P09 | 3 roommates and him: “I do not know if climbing over the Great Wall is common among students. But classmates around me, for example 4 in our dormitory are all climbers.” |  | “(I) View mostly on politics, especially politically sensitive topics, blocked books and movies. For example, (I) checked what happened during the Wang Lijun Incident. And I also read about constellations because there is not much information in China” |

Three reported climbing over the Great Wall. P06 classified the climbers of the Great Wall he knew into three groups: democracy lovers; film watchers and fans; and teachers and professionals who climbed over for academic resources. They reported two ways to learn about how to climb over the Great Wall: through the Internet, for example Sina Weibo or Beidu tieba, and through social networks, for example a friend. The two major purposes of climbing over the Great Wall are politics and entertainment.

The findings of the participants’ climbing over the Great Wall are much more encouraging than that of the 2007 experiment (Morozov, 2011, p.71). In that experiment, the studied users in countries that controlled the Internet searched for pornography once they were given the access to the unfettered online freedom instead of ‘the horrors of their regimes’. And ‘it is not clear if they would return for political content’ (p.71). The results of the experiment call into question the assumption that the liberalised Internet will liberalise authoritarianism. The results of this study, however, may not be that encouraging considering that pornography is widely available on the Chinese Internet and that social desirability affects the results of interviews and focus groups.

*Table 58. Climbing over the Great Wall II*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Frequency | Effect | Attitude |
| P07 | Once | Shocked by the information. She claimed, “my friend also said that I should not believe that much certain content written outside China. So I did not read further and did not care much about it.” | Do not care much about it |
| P09 | Regularly | “Usually viewing blocked content does not change my original conclusions, only when I neglect some important aspects.” “Because I think that I view information about an issue from foreign countries just to see if there are other opinions from other perspectives.” | Never talked about climbing over the Great Wall with others;  Usually does not give his classmates the tools to climb over the Great Wall when asked by them;  “I analyse while reading. I do not suggest them to climb over if I am not sure that they have the analysing ability.” |
| P11 | Never |  | Claimed that she was not interested in the topic of climbing over the Great Wall after listening to P07 and P09’s experience and understanding of climbing over the Great Wall. |

Altogether P07 and P09 reported three effects of climbing over the Great Wall: a shocking effect, a perspective-changing effect, and an alternative-perspective-providing effect. P07 and P09 held quite different attitude toward their experience of climbing over the Great Wall. P07 was first shocked and then claimed that she did not care much about what she had read on that website. She said, “my friend also said that I should not believe that much certain content written outside China. So I did not read further and did not care much about it.” Her and her friend’s doubt about the credibility of online content on blocked websites is not unfounded. To liberate authoritarian regimes is one of the United States’ important foreign policies (Morozov, 2011). Voice of America and Radio Free Asia are both corporations funded by the U.S. Congress with the stated mission ‘to promote freedom and democracy and to enhance understanding though multimedia communication of accurate, objective, and balanced news, information and other programming about America and the world to audience overseas’ (Ng, 2013, p.155) . In China, the two corporations are seen as ‘propaganda networks of the United States’ and their mission is interpreted as ‘aiming to topple foreign governments’. Some so-claimed independent news sources and Chinese overseas organisations are also accused of being funded by the United States. For example, according to critics, Boxun, one of the earliest blogs in China, ‘from 2005 to 2009 received funding form the National Endowment of Democracy, a U.S. organisation funded entirely by the State Department’ (p.158). Moreover, there are rumours that the blog has been utilised by anti-Bo Xilai insiders to undermine Bo by leaking information. And some of what is published on Boxun ‘remains pure speculation’ (p.159). Such connections like the email to Twitter during Iranian protests in 2009 (Morozov, 2011), are skilfully utilised by the party-state to cultivate sceptical attitudes toward content unauthorised by the party-state.

P09 seemed quite sceptical about others’ ability to use climbing over the Great Wall properly. He claimed that he never talked about climbing over the Great Wall with others and usually did not give his classmates the tools when asked by them.

### 4.8.2 Twitter and Facebook

*Table 59. Twitter*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Following | Follower | Message | Habit | Frequency |
| P06 | Many: “Most of them are stars. The rest are official twitters of various news websites.” | “A few because I seldom use it.” | Stars, music, news, incidents of emergency, sometimes ask stars a question | To follow the incidents of emergencies on Twitter to know what is happening timely.  To follow on with the comments on official news websites later on.  Sometimes reads the list of topics on Twitter. | Seldom because of inconvenience caused by climbing over the Great Wall |

*Table 60. Facebook*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Following | Friend | Message |
| P06 | Stars followed on Twitter too | Several close friends who study abroad | “I pay special attention to what they see and hear in America or Holland. I take it as a window for me to the outside world. They post photos of life, complaints about the difficulty of study.”  “My classmate said that a big bottle of mineral water costs only two pounds in the UK.” |

Twitter and Facebook both played their part as tools to follow stars and learn about music P06 liked. Other than that, P06 used Twitter to follow official twitters of various news websites to learn about news, especially incidents of emergency. Moreover, P06 consciously employed Facebook ‘as a channel to the outside world’. He learned more about America and Holland through Facebook accounts of several close friends studying abroad. The case of P06 indicates that English skills affect participants’ choice of Internet use. Both P06 and P09 climbed over the Great Wall to access blocked websites, however P09 did not report use of Twitter and Facebook on which the major language is English. In addition, the Chinese government filtering strategy does have an effect on participants’ choice of Internet use. P06 explained that he seldom used Twitter due to the inconvenience caused by climbing over the Great Wall.

## 4.9 Participant as a communicator

The section concentrates on participants’ content sharing and generating activities.

*Table 61. Participant as a communicator: why*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Why |
| P01 | **Belief in the power of online sharing and watching:** “I want to let others know by sharing in order to make them angry and make comments. I do not want to make comments because I lack words to express myself well. My support and sharing of the posts can help to raise concerns about the issues. My support and sharing of the posts has effects.”  “However, the power of my sharing is very small, hardly significant.” |
| P02 | **To spread and make Friends:** “I shared the report and made comments. Others will know through my Qzone. I need to spread it.”  “It is my personality to tell others. This is what I think. I hope that you have the same heart, same love for others, and same feeling. When they read it, it is mutual encouragement. I feel happy to be close with those who share the same ideas and want to make friends with them.” |
| P03 | No good effect: “Comments on certain issues cannot bring good effects.” |
| P04 | No effect: “I do not think that it is of any use to retweet what happens in China. I do not feel that I can control (anything). I retweeted the Wang Lijun Incident because I think he is a good man. My classmates retweeted as well, saying something like that he was set up and was a sacrificial lamb. (I) think that he is good and then retweeted. I think that it is of no use to retweet about others which involve inequality. Anyway it is of no use to say something. It does not change anything.” |
| P05 | Sharing self-generated study materials: **Useful to others**: “I think it is good if it is useful to someone.” |
| P06 | **Try to express and make a difference:**  “There are things that I want to make my effort to change…but to make my contribution, to express my demands and also let my followers know my demands in a hope to make a difference.”  To attract following and retweeting:  “I hope to attract following and retweeting which brings me a sense of achievement.”  “To attract followers. Increasing number of followers gains me face (brings me honour).”  I felt the power of democracy and I was inspired. And then I tweeted it on Weibo.”  No effect: “It does not help to share it in QQ groups, there are limited number of people in QQ group. You cannot find the matching blood.” |
| P08 | Expect no significant effect: When talking about politically sensitive content and comments online: “As to such content you read it and know it. That’s enough. Some ideas do not necessarily need to be publicised. I think that it does not make any significant difference to do so.” |

The reasons are classified into four categories: to make a difference, to gain followers, to make friends, and to provide something useful to others. Positive correlation was found between participants’ belief in the power of the Internet and online political expression. However, in most cases participants remained silent online with political or social issues.

*Table 62. Reasons for silence: censorship*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Censorship |
| P01 | The effect of censorship: “I heard that university students were asked to ‘have a talk’ because of radical comments. I think that it affects what I say online. I will be more cautious and will not say things that, I feel, will bring bad effect to me.” |
| P03 | **Just read and think without comments**: “I think that it is better not to comment on such issues (Wang Lijun and government corruption), because there may be certain consequences if you do. Anything political is complicated. Someone may inquiry you if you make comments. I just read, never make comments on anything political.” |
| P04 | Example: The Wang Lijun Accident  “There was video on Weibo. It was the comments made by the State Department of USA. There was no news report about it in China because of the blockade. My parents checked *Lianhe Zaobo[[79]](#footnote-79)* online which analysed the reasons. I told my boyfriend when I knew about it and said, ‘Wang Lijun is such a good man. Why should he be in prison?’ But I dared not to tell others. To tell others such things, you know the situation in China, well, is of no use, and might be sent to prison. So, usually ‘I’ do not make improper comments, just talk at home.” |
| P06 | Effect of deleting:  “I was deleted once and then dare not to post something sensitive.” “I felt the power of democracy and I was inspired. And then I tweeted it on Weibo. It was deleted. I was scared and then dare not to do so.”  You are watched:  “Sometimes I worried about surveillance when climbing over the Great Wall, turn the page off right after viewing and would not make any comments. (Censorship) does not affect what I view, but does affect what I retweet and tweet.” |
| P07 | Usually does not comment on political issues |
| P08 | Affected: When asked why not share any political content  “Both self-protection and thinking that it does not make any difference.” |
| P12 | Self-protection |

Findings of the study confirm what has been found about Internet censorship and self-censorship in China. For fear of censorship and punishment, six out of twelve participants explicitly admitted that their online communication on political or social issues was affected. P04’s understanding of the punishment for improper online comments is very severe.

*Table 63. Reasons for silence: lack of motivation*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Motivation |
| P01 | Lack of motivation: “The censorship has almost no effects on what comments I make online because I just receive information and seldom make comments. In most cases, I do not make comments because I do not feel necessary to do so. Your comments online do not make any difference.” |
| P02 | “Usually I do not comment on news I read. I turn them off after reading. I read comments, but will not make comments. Most people do not make comments. Very likely they think as we do. We do not want to make improper comments. Moreover, registration is time-consuming. On one hand, you are required to fill lots of information. On the other hand, it is difficult to remember the pass words. You need to register to make comments. I am sick of registration. I am unwilling to bother to get registered, so will leave after reading others’ comments.”  “I do not necessarily retweet every piece of news that affects me. Although I have feelings or thoughts. I only share when I want to and when I have time to do so.” |
| P03 | Don’t bother to do so: “Usually I do not share or comment on (news), I feel it inconvenient.” |
| P04 | No effect |
| P05 | Motivation for sharing: “Sometimes it is for collecting points. For example, you need points to download from Baidu.” |
| P08 | Affected: When asked why not share any political content  “Both self-protection and thinking that it does not make any difference.” |
| P11 | Not interested |

It is evident that participants were not motivated enough to make a difference in China by their online expression in most cases. P01, P04, and P08 believed that their comments did not make any difference and thus they did not comment on political issues online. P02, P03, P05, and P11 did not even think about the effect of their comments.

*Table 64. Reasons for silence: lack of experience or expertise and lack of trust*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Lack of experience or expertise and lack of trust |
| P01 | Experience: No comments on things he does not have direct experience of and things he is not an expert on.  Expertise: He thinks that those who posted extreme comments online are people who do not know much about the background and have not much knowledge. He does not agree with extreme comments. |
| P09 | **Lack of trust in other Internet users:** He said that he analysed what he read. He did not know whether or not those who read what he shared would do the analysis. He was not sure how many people would read what he shared and shared them with others without any analysing. Therefore, he did not share them. |

*Table 65. Reasons for silence: personality and online labelling*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Personality | Online labelling |
| P01 | “I am not a person who tries to persuade others.” |  |
| P09 |  | “There is a problem. Once you speak, others will attack you. Finally you are labelled either as a Dailu Party or a 50 Cent Party. You must be one of them. Finally people consciously or unconsciously choose to be silent.” |

P01 and P09 have given another four reasons: lack of experience or expertise, lack of trust, personality and online labelling. P09 provides evidence that the bad-name labelling strategy works perfectly to silence a certain cohort of Internet users. The Dailu (Leading the way) Party is used on the Chinese Internet to refer to people who are highly dissatisfied with the Chinese government and want to replace it. They would lead the way for the American army if the United States invaded China. The same strategy of ‘painting all Twitter users as a secret American revolutionary vanguard’, was employed by the Iranian government in the aftermath of the 2009 protests or so-called Twitter revolution (Morozov, 2011, p.12). By connecting online expressions that pose threats to the regime to foreign intervention, especially from the United States, the perceived enemy and rival, both Iranian and Chinese governments discredit such expressions and thus effectively reduce their ‘negative’ influence. The 50 Cent Party are Internet commentators hired by the government of the People's Republic of China (both local and central) or the Communist Party to post comments favourable towards party policies in an attempt to shape and sway public opinion on various Internet message boards (Bristow, 2008; Beach, 2010). There are ‘an estimated 250,000–300,000 “50 Cent Party members” at all levels of government—central, provincial, and local’ (King, Pan & Roberts, 2013, p.326; Morozov, 2011).

*Table 66. Participant as a communicator: channel, message and frequency*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Channel | Message | Frequency |
| P01 | Sina Weibo | **Entertainment:** Videos and pictures, beautiful pictures, funny animated pictures that make people laugh, cartoons. | Frequently |
| **Politics:** News on South Weekly, Sometimes the participant did not share what he read on news websites; sometimes he shared all he read. Approximately, he shared once out of two or three readings; News about governmental misconducts;  **Study:** information about MSC entrance examination | Sometimes |
| **Politics:** Satiric social commentary pictures or cartoons | Occasionally |
| **Politics:** News about people’s welfare with one or two words short comments;  Original tweets | Not much |
| Renren | **Entertainment:** Videos, videos of music | Most frequently |
| **Entertainment and life:** Cartoons that he likes, the participant’s status;  In most cases, sharing content without interaction. | Occasionally |
| **Entertainment:** Comments on music, example, ‘the song feels good’. | Not much |
| No interaction with strangers. | Never |
| QQ | P01 almost never shares news through QQ. In most cases, he just reads or is not concerned with news shared in QQ groups. He doubts about the credibility. He thinks he would check the credibility before sharing, but actually he almost never did share. He shared once what a friend asked him to share from his friend’s QQ space about a hospital scandal. | Almost never |
| Campus BBS | **Politics:** He would write something if he knows about it. |  |
| All Channels | Insulting or extreme message or comments;  original long posts | Never |
| P02 | Sina Weibo, Qzone, Tecent Weibo, Renren | P02 randomly chooses one platform to share what he reads.  **Chatting,**  **Study:** study, information about study, learning experience, study resources,  **Entertainment and life:** Pictures ***about life***, health; arranging gatherings like diners or small trips; funny conversation; caring about each other; sceneries, and family, blogs (mostly about life and feelings), university events, love,entertainment news, MV, good articles he read on a literature website, expression of support for stars he follows, mini-novels, poems and prose.  **Politics:** issues of group interest; complaining of bad teachers or courses, comments on news relevant to university students,comments about some current affairs, comments on celebrities’ comments on current affairs, news reports about current affairs and others’ comments:  **My articles** | Occasionally. “I use lots of platform. It is impossible to deal with them all. Maybe someday I am seized by a whim. That is it.” |
| University microblog | **Life:** Sharing of news about university events | Occasionally |
| Online calling for articles or slogans | Slogan, articles, poems | Low frequency |
| P03 | Qzone  Weibo | **Life:** Original posts: feelings  Sharing (**Entertainment and life):** feelings; something interesting; something making people laugh; university event slogans, web-game information  Most are words | Seldom |
| P04 | Weibo | Original content: **Life and leisure:** “any ideas, any interesting places to go, unhappy experience, anything.” “about my mood, going out, photos.” “I feel that it is inconvenient to chat on QQ, I will chat on Weibo if I do.” “invite my classmate to play or eat”.  Retweet:  A great variety of things. **Entertainment and life:** Love, career, food and amusement in Chongqing, fashion street shoot, beautiful places with pictures, pretty dogs, interesting sentences,  **Politics:** The Wang Lijun Incident, news about the increase of oil price  She only retweets about finance and economics on Weibo, not on other platforms. | Frequently, almost every day |
| Renren | Her Renren posts were viewed more than 2,000 times. **Life:** “Recently I posted photos of going out with my boyfriend. It has been about one or two years since my last posting. It has been a long time that I haven’t post any photos.” | Seldom recently, more frequently in the first and second year |
| Fetion | Chatting |  |
| P05 | Qzone; QQ contact | **Entertainment and life:** Life, moving stories, entertaining videos; **Study:** study, career. | Frequently |
| Renren |  | Seldom |
| Baidu, Tudou | **Study:** About study, PPT about course presentation, essays |  |
| P06 | Weibo; Baidu Tieba | **Entertainment and life & politics:** “Life; comment on current issues, for example, North Korea stopped nuclear test exercises after receiving something from USA; and also about people’s welfare issues, for example to compare the sound children’s welfare in America with that in China when viewing a child beggar; to demonstrate the game playing among different countries through what is happening in Syria; North Korea is a shameless country that does not develop its own economy, but ask for money from other countries by nuclear threatening.”  The proportion between original tweets and retweets: 2:3  His comments are always of two or three sentences.  Comments on Liu Xiang’s five absences from Political Consultative Conference as a member of the CPPCC (Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference):  “Liu Xiang is an athlete. His major responsibility is training and winning honours for the country, not sleeping in conferences” “Politics in China is funny. It drags every famous person who have not become another country’s citizen to conference. Nonsense.”  Photos taken by himself or pictures searched and found online to match with words to make it more vivid.  An anti-Party demonstration in Hong Kong: “We were at Causeway Bay, Hong Kong at that moment. There was a huge contrast. On one side, it was the celebration of Hong Kong’s Return to China. On the other side, it was the demonstration. I felt so excited. I saw Hong Kong people who demanded general election and no interference of mainland Chinese government in the election of their Legislative Council, their power, and their demands. They have the environment and conditions to express what they really think and lots of participants are young students. I felt the power of democracy and I was inspired. And then I tweeted it on Weibo.”  Others’ tweets and comments; posts from Facebook and Twitter; less words, more pictures and videos; pictures : videos 1:1; more music; domestic political news : international political news 2:1 : “dark side such as critiques of NPC & CPPCC (the National People's Congress and the Chinese Political Consultative Conference), forced demolition, city inspectors”; message to find persons whose blood type matches to save ill people.  Retweeting Guizhentang live bear bile extracting issue with a comment “How can men be so cruel!”  Upload self-made DVD or CD with resources collected.  A post about today’s interview. | Frequently |
|  | QQ contacts, group, and Qzone | **Entertainment and life: “**Trivial matters of life; funny pictures, rage comics, something entertaining to have some fun; Information about Li Wen, work, life and feelings, sometimes hanging out or short travelling within Chongqing, self-made posters, resources collected and made, concerts, receiving Li Wen at the airport, or group buying of concert tickets, some photos of the stars I like, and some events or programmes of my college.” |  |
|  | Twitter | **Entertainment:** Sometimes ask stars a question to try his luck, questions like “Who is going to produce the new album?” “What is the first single?” |  |
| P07 |  |  | Seldom make any comments on politics |
| QQ, Renren | Chatting and networking |  |
| Specialised forums | **Study:** Upload codes |  |
| P08 | QQ (contact, group, and Qzone) with friends and classmates | **Politics:** Comments on very special issues that friends posts | Occasionally |
| QQ (contact, group, and Qzone) with friends and classmates | **Life:** How to cook delicious dishes |  |
| QQ (contact, group, and Qzone) with friends and classmates | Chatting |  |
| Internet applications open to common users or the public | Any comments or opinions | Never |
| P09 | With friends | Chatting; **Study:** English learning resources |  |
| A special group of people | History, politics |  |
| On public platforms | Political news or articles | Never |
| P10 | QQ | Chat | Frequently |
| With classmates | Comment online | Occasionally |
| P11 | QQ | Chat | Frequently |
|  | Politics | Seldom |
| P12 |  | Politics | No comments, nor retweeting |
| Renren | Social issues | Seldom retweet |
| Renren | Study, life, health |  |

It is found that there are three types of channels: acquaintance channels, stranger and mixed channels, and public channels. The message they shared or generated is classified into three groups: entertainment and life; study; and politics. What they shared and generated concentrates on entertainment and life and they did it frequently. Next to content on entertainment and life is study. Politics like social issues and history either constitutes a very small proportion of what participants shared and generated, or has never been shared or generated.

## 4.10 Civic talk

Civic talk is defined by Hsieh and Li (2014) as ‘informal discussion of public affairs’ (p.27) or ‘informal discussions of politics within the private sphere’ (p.32), or ‘informal political discussion with peers in one’s personal networks’ by Klofstad (2011, p.28). Politics is defined, in this dissertation, as the activities associated with the governance of a country or area, including the activities associated with the political parties, and the activities to promote or protect the self-interests of individuals and groups. Civic talk is defined as participants’ online and offline informal discussion of politics in their personal networks. It also includes informal talk about messages received online of which the purpose or effect is to enlarge participant’s perspectives, opinions, and understandings of something, or which involves participant’s considering relevant facts from multiple points of view or critical thinking. It is different from entertainment conversation, to make participants of the conversation laugh or happy, and networking conversation, to network with participants of the conversation.

*Table 67. Civic talk: channel, deliberator and message*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Channel | With whom | Message |
| P01 | Offline: dormitory | Roommates | News read online |
| Online: frequently-visited forums | Those who posted the message. |  |
| P02 | Offline: dormitory | Roommates | Online news relevant to them |
| P03 | Offline: dormitory | Roommates | Online news |
| P04 | Online: Weibo | Classmates | Wang Lijun;  Xiaoyueyue |
| Offline: home | Parents | Wang Lijun |
| P06 | Online: Weibo | Followers and readers of your comments (all strangers):  “Sometimes people will interact with you after reading your comments. Sometimes they support you, sometimes they do not. There are many opportunity of interaction on Weibo. Those who interact with you are those who follow you, or those see your comments following the original tweets. They express agreement or disagreement on your comments. They are all strangers.” | Music, politics:  “(We) chat about music most, sometimes express opinion about various political phenomena or say one or two sentences. For example, members of the People’s Congress sleep in the conference; the conference of the People’s Congress is the gathering of parents of Chinese overseas students. New current affairs in China are also discussed. There are lots of discussion about the problems in China on Weibo.”  Stars’ interaction with their fans. |
| P08 | Offline | Classmates and friends | My opinions and ideas |
| P09 |  | A special group of people | Political issues |
| P10 |  | Classmates | Politics, military; usually do not talk about such topics, but other topics |
| P12 | Offline: dormitory | Roommates | Political sensitive content from Renren |

*Table 68. Civic talk: Role of the participant and frequency*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Channel | Role of the Participant | Frequency |
| P01 | Offline: dormitory | Contribution: shares the news when other roommates see it; ask other roommates to read the news when he thinks the news is shocking; makes comments of a few sentences when he knows the issue that other roommates are talking about. | Sometimes, not frequently |
| Listening: In most cases, “I am a listener when my roommates are discussing.” | Sometimes |
| Thinking: “I will think about it when hearing different opinions. But that is all.” |  |
| Online: frequently-visited forums | Contribution: One or two words like “thanks”, no arguments | Occasionally |
| P02 | Offline: dormitory | Contribution: shares the news, starts the conversation by making comments. |  |
| P03 | Offline: dormitory | Says a few sentences | Occasionally |
| P04 | Online: Weibo | Classmates: “This must be film-making. How could it be possible? There have been so many people passing by without helping.”  “I think so. They haven't helped when they obviously saw her.”  “Just said a few words. Nothing more afterward. Just a topic for chatting.” |  |
| Online | Not interested in | Sometimes |
| Offline: home |  |  |
| P05 |  | “Mainly I listen to others.” |  |
| P06 | Online: Weibo | Retweets and comments | Frequently |
| P08 | Offline | “When I have opinions or ideas, I will discuss with my classmates and friends.” |  |
| P09 |  | Discuss |  |
| P10 |  | Discuss | On a very few occasions. Reason: “Because we, science student, usually talk about other topics. Social science students talk more about those topics.” |
| P11 |  |  | Women are not interested. |
| P12 | Offline: dormitory |  | Sometimes; more interested in games |

Civic talk went within and beyond the Internet. The accounts of the participants paint a picture in which some are spreading or communicating some political, sometimes politically sensitive, content online through various channels, mass or interpersonal; while some dare not to do so, but discuss and disseminate through offline interpersonal channels which they consider safe. Due to the nature of the Internet as a medium for both mass and interpersonal communication, participants’ online mass communication interacts with their interpersonal communication. The diffusion and effect of online content follows the two-step or multi-step model and goes beyond the Internet through offline interpersonal communication. Participants may first read a certain piece of political news online on public platforms such as news portals, forums and so on. And then they discuss the news with their friends, classmates, or special groups of people through interpersonal communication channels online like QQ contact as P04, P09 and P10 did. The diffusion and the effect of the news go through two steps from mass communication to interpersonal communication. When receiving a piece of news from a public platform or interpersonal channel online, P01 or P06 posted it onto a stranger platform with brief or longer comments. Their posts and comments attracted interaction, further retweeting, or both, and then a multi-step diffusion began.

For some participants the online diffusion stops at receiving the news, especially when the content is politically sensitive, but the diffusion moves on to offline interpersonal communication. For university students, this happens in the dormitory where they use the Internet in the presence of peers: roommates and classmates. Participants 01, 02, 03, 04 (at home because she lived at home with her parents), 08, and 12 all reported discussing political content they read online with their roommates and classmates in their dormitory or (in the case of P04) with her family at home. Therefore, the Internet does play a positive role as ‘an appropriate medium to link differently sized, overlapping and interconnected public spheres’ (Polat, 2005, p.449), if we reject the idea of ‘a single public sphere’, and accept instead the idea of multiple spheres (see Chapter 2, 2.2.5).

# Chapter 5: Participants’ perceptions of the Internet

## 5.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 painted a vivid picture of what the twelve participants did online with rich data generated from in-depth interviews, the focus group and web content search and analysis, and also reflected on the potential impact of their Internet use. Chapter 5 shifts the focus to how participants understood the Internet, their Internet use and the influence of the Internet in China and addresses the second objective of the research, to understand how the participants articulate and perceive their online experience. Five sections present in sequence what the study found about participants’ perceptions of the Internet’s effect, online comments and user-generated content, relevance of online content to them, censorship, and government corruption. In each section, comparison is made between perceptions of different participants to reveal the commonalities and differences. Comparison is also made between their online activities, to reflect on what contributed to similar or different perceptions.

## 5.2 Belief in the Internet’s effect

Belief of the Internet’s effect refers to a participant’s belief in how the Internet influences China, how he/she can have influence through the Internet, and how he/she is influenced by his/her Internet use. Firstly, it is worth noting that there was not any participant who brought up the topic of the political and social influence of the Internet in the researcher’s interview or in the focus group discussion before the researcher raised the issue. They had a lot to say about their Internet use, but they did not seem interested enough to bring up the topic of the political and social influence of the Internet, or they did not think it was important enough to be included in the conversation. To find out how the participants understand the topic and why the first five participants did not bring it into the conversation, the topic of the political influence of the Internet was introduced into the focus group discussion. During the focus group discussion, however, the other five participants, except P09, all admitted that they had not thought about the political influence of the Internet on China that deeply or had not thought about it at all (see Table 69). Moreover, their discussion about the influence of the Internet focused more on dissemination of pornography and violent content, increased knowledge and information, enriched entertainment, distorted psychological state, online fraud, spread of bad comments, faster and wider spreading of culture, spread of computer viruses, online shopping, the economy, and study rather than political influence (see Tables 69, 70, 72 & 75). The perspectives through which the participants understood the influence of the Internet evidence the success of the party-state in leading the discourse around the development of the Internet in China. Their understanding of the positive influence of the Internet resonates with the party-state’s strategy to develop the Internet as ‘a tool for business, entertainment, education, and information exchange’ while the social and political aspects of the Internet’s development is largely intentionally avoided and thus ignored (see Chapter 2, 2.5). Their concerns of the negative influence echo the party-state’s discourse to rationalise its control over the Internet.

However, the participants openly expressed their opinions when the researcher explicitly introduced the topic of the Internet’s political influence in China, except for P07 and P08 who seemed reserved on the topic. They talked about politically sensitive topics including climbing over the Great Wall to access blocked content, their understanding and attitudes toward censorship, and their discontent with the government corruption. This excludes the possibility that the topic was too sensitive and that the participants intentionally avoided it.

### 5.2.1 The Internet’s effect on Chinese society

*Table 69. The Internet’s effect in general: what it affects*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | In general | What it affects |
| P01 |  | Helps to solve social problems: “I believe that it (the Internet) helps to solve social problems.” |
| P05 | 80 out of 100: When asked the effect of the Internet one the current situation in China, P05 said, “I will give 70, 70 or 80 (out of 100 as to the effect of the Internet on the current situation). I think (that the score is) 80. It (The Internet) helps to improve (the current situation), but, it is above the pass level. But (it is ) far from the full score.” |  |
| P06 | Score 80 out of 100 the influential power of the Internet. | **Significant influence on people’s welfare and social news:**  “But on other aspects such as people’s welfare and social news, the power of the Internet is great.” “The power of the Interne is much greater than before.”  **Affect decision-making:**  “I think that it will at least affect the decision-making institutions.” |
| P07 | “I think that the influence of the Internet on the political system in China is extremely small.”  **Expect the Internet to change the current political system:** When asked if they expected the Internet to change the current political system, P07 said, “It would be better if the Internet could (change the current political system), (because) corruption is a serious problem now in China.” | **Economic influence:** From offline shops to online shops;  The influence of online game addiction on **study and life**;  Bad influence of movies: **Sexual openness** ruins the campus order. |
| P08 |  | **Economic influence:** soaring purchase of a certain product and soaring rise of price due to online spreading of certain news;  **Study:** Fewer books means less money and weight. |
|  | **Shopping online.** |
|  | **Social conscience** |
| P09 | The effect is two-fold: P09 believed that the Internet was a power to push political and cultural changes, but it also brought uncertainty of changing speed and outcomes. | **Political influence:** Promoting democracy. May be too fast to control. “I think that the Internet is firstly an important power in politics. For example, it can increase democratic scrutiny and participation…The Internet is a very important and indispensable power to promote the process of the state’s political system and our country’s construction of democracy as to democracy. On the other hand, however, (I think) from some perspectives based on my observation (that) some ways we use the Internet will bring some problems in China where the economy and the society has develop to such an extent. In terms of politics, there is no possibility for any system to be 100% accepted by the people or to meet the demands of all interest groups. It, in fact, on most occasions, seeks compromise or so-called balance. More often than not, there will be people who employ the power to break the balance. I am not saying that it is not good to break the balance. Actually, what I am saying is that the biggest problem of the Internet, I think, is its uncontrollability. I am not denying that democracy needs to be promoted and political reform needs to move forward in China. The problem is whether or not the involvement of the uncontrollable Internet as a catalyst will make the process of promoting democracy too fast to control. What will happen if it is too fast? For example, the Arab Spring burst all in a sudden last year. It was so fast. But China is such a large country. It is completely different from those countries. I will give an example. As to Tunisia, the current situation is the worst (the outburst of uprising could bring). The president is out of power and then there will probably be a long period of depression. If it happened in China, I think, the problem would not be as simple as how it happened in Tunisia. China is such a large country with multiple ethic groups. It will probably lead to splitting of the country finally. It is probable that the northeast region, the inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, even Guangxi and Ningxia will be separated from China. The territory of China will become as big as that in the Qin Dynasty. If that happens, it is impossible for China to revive and rise as a leading power on the global stage. The key point is that the power of the Internet is uncontrollable….”  **Cultural influence:**  “There is probably such an influence (on culture, but now I cannot tell to what extent it (the culture) will be influenced. People’s ways of thinking will be greatly changed.”  Ways of information consumption:  High rate of false news  “What we are facing is an era of picture-reading. It means that we believe what we see without thinking about what lies behind.” |
| P10 | When P09 talked about the effect of Internet on the Chinese political system: “(I) seldom think about such issues” When P09 talked about how media are influenced by political power in different countries:  “Actually I have not thought that much or that deep.”  The Internet has both positive and negative effects. | **Better-informed** public (citizens) |
| **Young people like us** |
| Influence **decision-making of national leaders**: |
| Severe **online fraud** with significant social influence |
| P11 | “The Internet is a double-edged sword”  As to its political influence, P11 admitted that she might think about it superficially, but not deeply. | **Politics: a channel for political participation.**  **Increase justice** |
|  |
| **Culture:** faster and wider spreading of culture |
| **Economy: “(**The Internet is)a convenient channel for non-economic professionals to gain knowledge. For example, there are a large number of people investing in stocks. They are non-professionals. They gain information from the Internet and make investment decisions themselves and will make profits, or something.” |
| **Negative effect:** distorted psychological state; online fraud; a channel for bad comments, infringement |
| P12 | Seldom thinks about the political influence of the Internet | **Increased knowledge and information** and **enriched entertainment** because of free information online  Great reliance on the Internet because of the speediness of the Internet: “For example, modern people require speediness in every aspect of life, to be fast. The significant feature of the Internet is its speediness. Everything can be done online, shopping online, contact, news, very fast. As a result, the whole society increasingly relies on the Internet. As time goes on, the living pattern of the whole society will change to completely rely on the Internet…This is what the Internet impresses me most. There is no other impression.” |

In terms of their perceptions of political influence of the Internet, the participants fall into two groups: P06 and P09 who believed the power of the Internet in politics; and P01, P07, P08, P10, P11, and P12 who seldom thought about and never thought deeply about it. The study found that both P06 and P09 regularly climbed over the Great Wall and both of them had a belief in the power of the Internet in politics. However, the study cannot draw conclusions on the relationship between the two. Different from P06, P09 thought that the effect was two-fold and explicitly expressed his worry about the uncertainty of changing speed and outcomes pushed by the Internet. P09’s understanding of the Internet’s political influence reflects the party-state discourse and displays strong nationalist sentiment. It demonstrates that climbing over the Great Wall does not necessarily free Internet users from the influence of the party-state’s propaganda. Internet users climbing over the Great Wall are likely to expose themselves to content that reinforces their beliefs developed within a controlled information environment as P09 did or refuse to leave the comfort zone as P07 did (see Chapter 4, 4.8).

As to the other participants of the focus group, when they were asked to discuss the influence of the Internet in China, politics was not their major concern. They talked about the Internet’s influence on economy, study, entertainment, people’s psychological state, and negative effects of online fraud, bad comments, infringement, and movies. In terms of politics, the participants’ understanding of what the Internet affects focused on three aspects: people’s welfare and social problems, government’s decision-making, and the people.

The following seven tables present findings of the participants’ understandings of how the Internet casts its influence in China. The participants attribute the influence of the Internet to three factors: the Internet itself, Internet news media and the government, and Internet users. They apparently talked much more about how the Internet casts its influence through its users than through the Internet itself, and through Internet media and the government. In total four tables address the four mechanisms of how Internet users matter. They are their opinions and concerns, opinion leaders, doubt about the current system, and gradual effects. Before going into the details, it is important to note a point from P07. She thought that the influence the Internet users made might not be the result of their intended action. She said, “the influence is there not because people want it and do the thing to make a difference, but because people do certain things of which the influence is the consequence.”

*Table 70. How it affects: the properties of the Internet*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | How it affects |
| P08 | **Through the Internet:** “It spreads throughout the entire Internet fast. If something bad happens, (**Through users:)** we will question our own conscience and denounce it. There will be some ideas and opinions coming out and some new changes. If it is something good, we will praise and learn from it.” |
| P09 | Uncontrollability: it (the Internet) is uncontrollable because of no state boundaries, high speed of information dissemination, low threshold of online speech, and online security issues. |
| P10 | Spread of viruses |

The participants said a little about the properties of the Internet which is the favourite topic of technology determinists. In total, the participants mention four natures of the Internet: high speed of information dissemination, low threshold of online speech, online security issues, and no state boundaries.

P09, who knew about the Arab Spring, demonstrated a complex feeling and a genuine worry about the effect of the Internet in China. On the one hand, he seemed to hope that the Internet would bring liberal democracy to China. On the other hand, he worried about the uncontrollable nature of the process and the uncertainty of the result. He worried that ‘the public might blindly follow the trend without analysing or deep thinking’ (see Table 91). His worry is the major factor that contributes to his silence online (see Table 64). The study cannot prove whether his worries results from his middle class status, from the frequent appearance of ‘maintaining stability’ (Weiwen, 维稳) in government discourse since the 1980s (Benney, 2014, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014), from the traditional political culture (see Chapter 2, 2.3.1), or from combined effects of the three factors. However, it is safe to argue that self-censorship may not always be forced upon the Internet users or ISPs by the party-state to maintain its regime. Sometimes the Internet users who are mainly composed of the urban middle class are willing to censor themselves because they and the party-state both benefit from the current system. The fear of chaos and uncertainty effectively holds them back from taking the risk (MacKinnon, 2008) (see Chapter 1, 1.4). Moreover, he explicitly demonstrated superiority over the ‘common’ people he himself did not think he belonged to (see Tables 8, 64 and 91). His understanding of censorship echoes that in the official discourse. The ‘common’, or majority of, Chinese people are not well-informed or sophisticated enough and thus they needed to be guided. Therefore, he willingly and actively gatekeeps for the less-sophisticated ‘common’ Chinese people for fear that their blindly following behaviours may lead to chaos.

*Table 71. How Internet affects: media exposure and government*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Media exposure | Government |
| P01 | Guaranteed effect: “However, if it is exposed by the media, there must be effects.” |  |
| P05 |  | National leaders or government officials online: “Leaders communicating online with the public probably is helpful in some ways.” |
| P09 |  | “This year, the Government intended to amend the Criminal Procedure Law and the Civil Procedure Law and publicised it online. The public can propose their suggestion to the state legislative body online.” |
| P10 |  | “It lets us know the situation in foreign countries, for example, issues in the Middle East, and allows people to discuss with each other. To national leaders, it is a reference, through which they know better the problems and situations in the Western countries and make better policies for us to achieve stable development.” |

P05, P09 and P10 believed that the Chinese government was positively influenced by the Internet. They suggested two ways in which the Internet influenced China through the government. First, the government has been actively employing the Internet to communicate with its people and to learn about people’s opinion of important policies like law-making. President Hu Jintao symbolically communicated with the Strong State Forum’s users for several minutes on June 20 2008. On every February 27 or 28 from 2009 to 2011, Premier Wen Jiabao communicated with Internet users through the interview room hosted by the official website of The Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China (http://www.gov.cn/) and the official website of Xinhua news (http://www.xinhuanet.com/). Secondly, the Internet serves as an information highway for the government. P10 thought that national leaders could also learn through the Internet as other Internet users did the problems and situations in Western countries and ‘made better policies for us to achieve stable development’. The point throws light on better understandings of the relationship between the Chinese government and the Internet. There is only a little literature (eg. Schlaeger, 2013) studying how the Internet helps the Chinese government to learn more about the outside world and how that would influence its decision-making and policy-making. Moreover, the Chinese government is usually studied as a whole, not as tens of millions of individual officials most of whom are Internet users as well.

*Table 72. How Internet affects: public opinion and concern*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Public opinion and concern |
| P01 | **Positive effects: “**I don’t know how the pressure of public opinion works, but I think that it will have an impact when there are many people concerning about an issue. That is why I concern about (social and political problems). When an issue attracts lots of people’s attention, it will attract the attention of relevant government departments.” (Researcher’s notes: Still the participant tends to rely on the government to solve the problem.) |
| P02 | **Positive effect:** Public opinion matters.  **Mechanism: through the government & through people**  **Through the government:** P02 believes that the government officials are Internet users. They are surely reading online content in order to know about people’s life. “The government also keeps a watchful eye on its people, society, every group, and every class.” “Because of the degree of attention (the issues attracting from the public), the government, the lower level leaders surely will pay more attention based on what all groups, people, Internet users concern about which reveals some problems. They will know and solve the problems.” “These are issues of people’s everyday life. That is what the government concerns most.”  **Through people:** “There should be effect if an issue attracts attention of a large number of people.” “Like what the advertisement says: my concern does not make a difference, but the concern of many people, to attract more people’s attention through one-to-many spreading, will turn out to be a power.”  “Some people will make comments. Some will know the fact and will form their own opinions after reading comments.”  “Finally it helps the public to advocate positive and healthy ideas.”  “If an issue attracts my attention, in my view, it has an effect.” |
| P03 | **Positive effect:**  “I think that it (public opinions online) has promoting effects.”  Example: The Wenzhou Train Crash  “There must be effect.” “Because now one measure has been taken. The speed of trains has been reduced.”  The Xiaoyueyue Accident  “It (the Internet) lets more people know about it (the accident).”  Mechanism: Through people & through government  **Through people:**  “It has significant impact on society. All people will have their opinions, so (although) they do not speak out what impact it brings.”  **Through the government:**  P03 believes that the government should be reading comments of the public online. |
| P04 | **No effect** |
| P05 | **Big power:** “The power of public opinion is big. Usually those might have got away if there had been no public concern online. However, when there is the power of the public, the justice of law is better respected in (the legal process of) similar cases like Yao Jiaxin and My father is Li Gang (than when the public opinion is absent). This is one of the merits of the Internet. Usually such cases spread rapidly like virus online. Everybody knows and concerns. I think that it is good.”  **Scale matters:** “There will be no effect if it is led by a small organisation.” |
| P06 | **Public opinion affects decision-making:**  “Take Guizhentang live bear bile extracting as an example. Guizhentang was supposed to be listed, but the China Securities Regulatory Commission (CSRC) decided to put the listing plan on hold because there were too many people who opposed the plan on Weibo.”  **Channel public opinion:**  “If the decision to build Three Gorges Dam was placed in today’s context, lots of scholars who have no channels to speak in the People's Congresses could express their expertise through Weibo. …if there are too many people opposing it, I think that the government will consider instead of making a decision by holding a conference and voting blindly. There must be effect.”  **Raise issues to a high level of concern:**  “Through other forces, the issue (Wenzhou Train Crash) raised the issue of transportation security to a higher level of concern.” |
| P08 | Affected by other buyers’ comments |
| P09 | “Different from traditional media like newspaper, broadcasting, and television, the Internet empowers its users by allowing them to voice their opinions.”  **Public opinion**  “Some time ago, a citizen in Nanjing posted a photo online. The public began to question how a civil servant with an income of several thousands of RMB a month could afford cigarettes worth several hundreds of RMB a pack.” |
| P10 | **Networked spreading:**  “If people like us who are young and active, see such a situation or problem, we like to spread it, one to ten, ten to a hundred. I agree with the opinion and my friend agrees too. Probably others don’t. And then there is a debate.”  “Some classmates know something and spread through the Internet. We discuss about it.”  The choice of the public |
| P11 | Example: “CCTV (China Central Television) news reported that Chairman Hu visited a woman at her home and asked her if she could afford the flat. She answered that the flat cost her 700 RMB per month. The news aroused a heated debate. The house price is high and the price she gave is too low. People human flesh searched her out, exposed the inside story, and it attracted the attention of the public. It brought great trouble, inconvenience to her and her daughter’s life. The case, however, shows how the public concerns about politics.”  **Freer speech and political transparency:**  “However, to see from a positive angle, it (the Internet) allows freer speech and allows us to keep a watchful eye on politics, and discuss politics. It demonstrates how it (the Internet) promotes political transparency and therefore increases justice of some issues.”  The case of Li Gang: public opinion and media exposure:  “However the government cannot control everything. For example, the case of Li Gang was exposed and solved through the power of media. It was more just. Money cannot silence all the problems. If you do so, the public will not accept it. Therefore to give the public an explanation, it (the government) dares not to go too far against the public opinion. Sometimes coerciveness does not work.” |

Most participants believed in the power of online public opinions and concern. They believed that the Internet provided a channel for Internet users to express and spread their opinions and concern about social issues. They believed that a social problem would attract the attention of the government and receive a better solution when it gained enough public concern online.

The Wenzhou Train Crash was the largest ‘online mass incident’ in 2011 (Bondes & Schucher, 2014) and it attracted wide attention from scholars (e.g. Hassid, 2012; Chen, 2014; Bondes & Schucher, 2014; Bondes & Schucher, 2014, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014). On July 23 2011 a crash of two high-speed trains happened near Wenzhou city, Zhejiang province and it killed over 40 people and injured hundreds. ‘Railway officials tried to cover up the accident’ and even had wrecked train cars buried quickly after the accident (Hassid, 2012). However, a message about the crash was posted on Sina Weibo just minutes after the crash and ‘exploded on Chinese social media almost immediately after the accident’ (Bondes & Schucher, 2014, p.51). A total of 26 million messages about the tragedy were posted across Chinese microblogging platforms (Hassid, 2012; Bondes & Schucher, 2014). The mass online incident has resulted in ‘a reversed official stance and a more thorough investigation’ (Hassid, 2012). Bondes and Schucher (2014, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014) provide two possible explanations for the considerably long and free accumulation of posts on the accident. One is that the online expressions of discontent serve as a ‘steam valve’ for the public. The other is that it results from ‘the intra-leadership struggles about the reform of the Ministry of Railways’. Anyway, analysis of opinions about the Wenzhou train crash expressed by the microbloggers demonstrates the Chinese people’s ‘growing reluctance to accept the social costs associated with China’s growth model, and certain features of the political system such as corruption and a lack of transparency’ (pp.103-4). The pressure of online public opinion is increasingly felt by China’s leadership.

The case of Yao Jiaxin also gained nationwide attention online. On 20 October 2010 in Xi’an city, Shanxi province, Yao Jiaxin, a 20-year-old third year university student, knocked down a middle-aged female peasant with his car and stabbed her to death for fear she might remember his plate number. Yao Jiaxin was finally sentenced to death and executed.

My father is Li Gang is another important ‘online mass incident’. On October 16 2010, 22-year-old Li Qiming who had been drinking crashed his car into two students on the Hebei University campus, injuring one and killing the other. After attempting to drive off and being caught by campus security, he reportedly said “go ahead, sue me if you dare, my dad is [local deputy police chief] Li Gang” (Hassid, 2012, p.222).

The case invoked a massive outcry both online and offline. Li Qiming was sentenced to six years in jail and ordered to pay the equivalent of $69,900 (£44,000) in compensation to the family of the dead and $13,800 (£8,700) to the injured woman (BBC News, 2011).

While scholars are quite sceptical about the positive influence of online mass incidents on the actual solution and addressing the causes of problems (Hassid, 2012; Chen, 2014), P01, P02, P03, and P05 seemed encouraged to believe in the power of online public opinion by those cases. P01 even attributed his concern about social problems to this belief. Only P04 expressed her disbelief in the Internet’s effect in general. However, the influence of the Internet through the government (see Table 71) and through public opinion (see Table 72) displays the two sides of one coin. On the one hand, the participants’ articulation demonstrates the Internet does affect the party-state. The party-state tries to convey the message that it is listening to the public through the Internet. On the other hand, it evidences the party-state’s capacity to lead public opinion through the Internet. It legitimises its ruling by making Internet users believe that they are heard and the party-state is accountable.

*Table 73. How Internet affects: opinion leaders and extreme comments*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Opinion leaders | Extreme comments |
| P01 | Positive effects: “Whatever their intentions are, they (opinion leaders) have positive effects.” | No substantial effect: “They can post extreme comments online, but those comments will have no substantial effects.” |
| P02 | **Comments:** “Some people will make comments. Some will know the fact and will form their own opinions after reading their comments.” |  |
| P05 | Helpful: “I think that if someone organises it, to put it crudely, some will follow the trend; to put it nicely, if someone plays a pioneer role, it helps to promote the establishing of other organisations. That is for sure.” |  |
| P06 | “Because we do not know whether or not the Three Gorges Dam should be built. It is the knowledge of experts. They can express their opinions through Weibo, to support or not. Based on what the experts list, many Internet users will have their own judgement.” |  |
| P09 | **Comments:** “Some people post their reflection online. I read it and find that it might probably be different from what I have learned before. This probably impels or stimulates me to think or reflect.” |  |
| P10 | **Comments to help the pubic better understand:**  “In the past when there was no Internet, if something happened, you might hear it from somebody. That was all. Now with the Internet, if something happens, it will come out and many people will comment on it, through which the public can understand it and will not speak or act on hearsay.”  **Initiate organising something**  Ask for money donations through QQ |  |

P01, P02, P05, P06, P09 and P10 expressed their belief in the positive influence of online opinion leaders. They suggested two ways in which online opinion leaders made a difference. The first one is to inform people, provide alternative perspectives, and influence people’s opinions or judgement by ‘making comments’. The second is to ‘promote the establishing of organisations’ by initiating organising something. Although P01 apparently held a sceptical attitude toward the intentions of online opinion leaders by saying, ‘whatever their intentions are’ and P05 also showed disdain to the behaviour of ‘following the trend’, they were both sure that their actual actions had positive effects.

*Table 74. How it affects: doubt about the current system*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Doubt about the current system |
| P06 | “Take Twitter revolution in Egypt for example. Almost through the Internet, they(the Western countries) showed the good side and the democratic aspects of Western countries to people in an undemocratic country and aroused their doubt about their political system and values. And the people were swayed.” |

*Table 75. How it affects: gradual effect*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Gradual effect |
| P06 | “The **social climate** will promote positive development of the society.” :  “Because of **better education**, people tend to care about the vulnerable groups.”  “There are **more and more people who are exposed to and accept these ideas** as I do.”  “Because we do not know whether or not Three Gorges Dam should be built. It is the knowledge of experts. “Because we do not know whether or not the Three Gorges Dam should be built. It is the knowledge of experts. They can express their opinions through Weibo, to support or not. Based on what the experts list, many Internet users will have their own judgement**.**”  “Through discussion of the train crash…the public will learn that it is not just a traffic accident, and that it involves many dark sides and corruption behind China’s high speed development.” |
| P10 | **Increase the public’s knowledge** of national policies and current situation at home and abroad:  “The emerging of the Internet helps us to better know the current situation at home and abroad. We can know the new policies issued by national leaders, which provides better base for what we do.”  “It (the Internet) lets us know the situation in foreign countries, for example issues in the Middle East, and allows people to discuss with each other.” |
| P11 | Dissemination of pornography and violent content. |

P06, P10 and P11 identified two types of gradual effects. One is positive. P06 and P10 believed that the Internet ‘increases the public’s knowledge of national policies and the current situation at home and abroad’ and deepens their understanding of important social issues like the influence of the Three Gorges Dam and ‘many dark sides and corruption behind China’s high speed development’ through online expression and debates. Together with the development of education, people become better-educated, better informed, and have better ability to make their own judgment; care more about the vulnerable groups; and accept alternative ideas. To sum up, such a ‘social climate will promote positive development of the society’. The other is negative. P11 expressed his worry about the negative effect of dissemination of pornography and violent content through the Internet.

*Table 76. The Internet’s effect in general: what it does not affect*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | What it does not affect | | |
| Political system | People | Culture |
| P06 | “The Internet should not be able to change the political status.”  “Just now I mentioned the political system. I think that it is impossible to change.”  “Discussion of the train crash will not change the superstructure.” | “Therefore in this education system, environment, and ambiance, people’s ways of thinking will remain the same and there will be no changes. Even if there are some changes, they will be small instead of substantial changes.” |  |
| P07 | Extremely small influence:  “I think that the power (the influence of the Internet on the political system in China) is extremely small.” |  |  |
| P08 | “No entity or individual is powerful enough to counterbalance the government” |  |  |
| P10 | “On key issues, it is the government who makes decisions.” | People in their 30s and 40s  “My first thought is that there is little influence on people in their 30s and 40s.” | Little influence on culture |
| P11 | “The Internet will definitely promote democracy in China, but it will not be that fast. Moreover, it is just a dream.” |  |  |
| P12 |  |  | The culture |

The participants thought that there were three aspects that the Internet had little influence on or could not change in China. They are the political system, people, and culture. The Internet was thought to make positive political changes, but it was thought impossible to change the system. It can influence the decision-making on some social issues, but ‘on key issues, it is the government who makes decisions’. P06 and P11 expressed their understanding of the Internet’s influence on people. They clearly distinguished people like them from other people. P10 and P12 claimed that the Internet had little influence on Chinese culture without having given much detail.

The previous part of the section demonstrates that most participants believed that the Internet had positive political influence in China, but the Influence was limited. The following four tables address what participants thought contributed to the limited political influence of the Internet: the government, the public, pioneers, and the environment.

*Table 77. What contributes to limited political influence of the Internet: the government*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | The government |
| P06 | **Measures to maintain the status quo:** “The government has its mouthpiece which leads and controls the direction of public opinion.”  **Unwillingness to change and petticoat influence:**  “Because I am in power and I oppress you. It is impossible to allow you to negotiate with me. I give you freedom, but you should not overthrow me. That is impossible.”  “Because the people at the superior level are connected. It is impossible for you to overthrow it(the political system) or sway it.” |
| P07 | **The government is in control: “The power of online public opinion is big, but the government controls the online public opinion.”**  “Though the power of public opinion is big. Just now a participant mentioned the uncontrollable nature of the Internet. Now we are doing computer studies. Some of my classmates are studying the trend of opinions on the Internet, such as the trend of online public opinions. The system automatically gathers all information posted on online forums, searches with key words and automatically deletes those that do not follow the trend (wanted by the government) immediately. Actually it is not completely uncontrollable. To some extent, it is controllable. In terms of public opinion, it is the Government that influences the cyberspace, not the opposite.” |
| P08 | **Censorship:**  “In China there is no medium which is as powerful as Aljazeera that could expose the dark side of the government and find out the truth. In China, no entity or individual is powerful enough to counterbalance the government.” |
| P10 | **Censorship and government control:**  “In our country, there are such occasions when law enforcement officers misconduct, the state will directly desalt the problem if the officers are powerful enough.”  “I think that the websites in China say that the Communist Party is such and such. It is almost the same as I learn from textbooks. I think that there are seldom other opinions. It is almost the same as I am educated unless I climb over the Great Wall or use other channels.” |
| P11 | The current political system and government control. |
| P12 | **No significant difference:** “If you do not climb over the Great Wall, I think, what you view is what is available in China. Therefore, as to the influence on culture, many are controlled. What is published is what is allowed to be published. You can view only such things which are not different from what was there before. Therefore, there will be no significant effect on culture. Although some people like to use cyber language to challenge the traditional culture and some words are rebellious. But (when) there is such a trend, the trend will be killed in its cradle with the control.” |

The government and its control over the Internet is believed by the participants as the number one factor that constrains the democratising potential of the Internet. P06 believed that the government was in power and it was impossible for the government to allow its people to negotiate or overthrow the government. His statement “I give you freedom, but you should not overthrow me” is a vivid demonstration of the bottom line of cyber freedom allowed by the party-state. The measures that the participants thought the government took to control the Internet are opinion-leading and filtering.

*Table 78. What contributes to limited influence of the Internet: the public*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | The public |
| P06 | Short life of grass-roots movements:  When asked if the discussion of live bear bile extracting and Xiaoyueyue will promote positive development in food security or political system,  “No, because this is a grass-roots phenomenon. The public might follow the trend. When the issue is really hot, people think that it is cruel. But when the issue is over, nobody cares.” |
| P10 | P10 assumes that they (people in their 30s or 40s) do not share with each other news and comments online like the young people.  “We may discuss it (some politically sensitive topics spread by other classmates) for fun and usually will not think about it too that (without explicitly indicating it). ” |

P06 believed that online grass-roots movements were short-lived. The public just follow the trend when the issue is hot, but they do not really care. P10 assumed that people in their 30s or 40s ‘did not share with each other news and comments online’ like young people. Moreover, he also thought that young people like him might discuss some politically sensitive topics just for fun, but usually would not think about it too much. They both did not think that the public or people like themselves really cared or thought deeply about those issues. Such a distrust in the public is also evident in P06 (see Table 73) and P09’s (see Tables 8, 58 & 86) articulation. The distrust toward the public and the tendency to rely on the party-state to solve problems (see Tables 71 & 72) showed by the participants is believed by some scholars (see Chapter 2, 2.2.3 & 2.2.5) as anti-democratic and pro-authoritarian.

*Table 79. What contributes to limited influence of the Internet: pioneers*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Pioneers |
| P06 | Limited resources:  “Firstly you need money and you need power to change. But it is, I think, impossible to change, or to so-called overthrow the current system and to transfer to a Western democracy. It is such a sophisticated and complex issue while there are only a very very small number of people who know the situation and know that this (the political system) is not right in China. However, they do not have the conditions, the capital, and the strength to do it (transit China into a Western democracy).”  “There may be some people who want to do it (make a difference to the superstructure), but they are alone and on their own.”  “The only thing they can do is to emigrate to a foreign country by hard working, or to send their next generation abroad.” |

P06 believed that it was impossible for pioneers to change the political system. Such a belief evidences the party-state’s strategy to control online activism (see Chapter 4, 4.5.2) and associational activities and collective actions (King, Pan & Roberts, 2013). It demonstrates that such a strategy works to generate disbelief in the possibility of changing the political system through individual or collective influence and consequently it discourages political participation through lowering one’s political efficacy (see Chapter 2, 2.2.2, political efficacy).

*Table 80. What contributes to limited influence of the Internet: environment*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Environment |
| P06 | “Therefore in this education system, environment, and ambiance, people’s ways of thinking will remain the same and there will be no changes.” |
| P10 | Education:  “But I think, how to put it, I have learned those things like Marxism for tens of years. We may discuss it (some politically sensitive topics spread by other classmates) for fun and usually will not think about it too that (without explicitly indicating it). ” |

P06 believed that ‘people’s ways of thinking would remain the same’ and consequently ‘there would be no changes’, if the environment remained the same. P10 claimed that he had been educated and cultivated for tens of years which indicated that it was impossible for the Internet to change him or people like him. Their understandings resonate with the argument that the Internet alone is not a sufficient condition for change and the realisation of its potential or the direction of its impact depends on the context in which the Internet is embedded (see Chapter 1, 1.4).

### 5.2.2 Individual’s effect through the Internet

*Table 81. The participants’ belief of their influence through the Internet*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | The participants’ belief of their influence through the Internet | | |
| What I do | What I expect | Belief in individual’s influence |
| P01 | Share information | “Want others to see it (the information I shared) and to make them angry about it.” | Small influence: “The influence of my sharing is extremely small.”  “My Internet use has effect on the society.”  “I can only show my concern (about the issues), but I cannot influence the decision making of the government.” |
| Support others’ posts when they attracted many followers | “My support has an effect.” |
| What I do not do: | “My comments do not have an |
| make comments | influence.” |
| P04 | Retweeted: the rise of oil price,  Wang Lijun, Xiaoyueyue  Not retweeted: social inequality |  | “I do not think that it is of any use to retweet what happens in China. I do not feel that I can control (anything). I retweeted the Wang Lijun Incident because I thought that he was a good man. My classmates retweeted as well, saying something like that he was set up and was a scapegoat. (I) think that he is good and then retweeted. I think that it is of no use to retweet about other issues which involve inequality. Anyway it is of no use to say anything. It does not change anything.” |
| P05 | I have my principles of conduct. | **Not expect an influence at national level but expects to make a difference at her community level:**  When asked if she can do something to make a difference  “I have not thought about it….I do not think that the country can change because of me. No. **Small changes,** for example to change something in my university, to change my friends’ ideas, may be possible. I have my principles of conduct.” | No effect: “I do not think that the result will be different because I read it or care about it.” |
| P06 | “To express my opinions and demands through tweeting, retweeting, commenting and voting online.” | To make a difference:  “There are things that I want to make my effort to change…but to make my contribution, to express my demands and also let my followers know my demands in a hope to make a difference.” | Small influence: “Probably 1 out of 100. There must be some effect.” |
| P08 | Never comment or express my opinions online |  | No significant effect |

In terms of their belief in their influence through the Internet, participants fall into two groups: P01 and P06 who believed that they had a little influence through the Internet, and P04, P05, and P08 who had disbelief in their influence through the Internet. The two participants who believed in their ability to make a difference, though very limited, both utilised stranger or public platforms online for political deliberation (see Table 42). Comparison between those participants who spread, generated, or conversed about political content on a stranger or public platform (see Tables 36 & 37) and those who did so only on an acquaintance platform, or with acquaintances, or those who engaged in no political deliberation online at all demonstrates that the former tended to have higher belief in their influence through the Internet than the latter (see Table 81). This finding will be further elaborated on in Chapter 6, 6.4.4.

### 5.2.3 The Internet’s effect on individuals

The participants thought that their Internet usage influenced their views, behaviours, and attitudes.

*Table 82. Internet’s effect on participants’ view*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | What I do | Influence on my view |
| P01 | Read without deep thinking or memorising: “I am such a person who reads, and forgets without deeply exploring a question.”  “I only read in most cases, and read often for the sake of reading.”  “It is because of my personality and (limited horizon) that makes me not think over.”  “I read many things just for the sake of reading, and forget afterward.” | **Broaden my view: “**I think that what I read online mainly influences my ideas and understanding.”  **Increase knowledge:** “It enriches my knowledge and experience. I know more.” |
| P02 |  | **“Help me to think deeper and think from multi-angles”** |
| P05 |  | **Broaden my scope of knowledge:**  The effect of war reports: When asked if she compared war reports with the current situation in China  “I did a little bit. But I have a feeling that we are now in peace when I compare. With comparison, well, (I think that) the Party is very useful. At least we are living a peaceful and safe life.” |
| P06 | “View Facebook status of my former classmates who now study abroad”; | **“A channel to know the outside world”** |
| Chats, hang out and travel with online friends; |  |
| Reads political news and critiques from different sources;  Climbs over the Great Wall to view blocked content; | **Doubt and development of my own judgment:**  “(After reading,) I doubt about what China will become following the current route. Although we cannot change it, we at least can learn from those critiques, or learn what I need from others’ opinions, and develop my own judgment toward the reality, or other aspects like the core values of the East or traditions. And I learn to value the essence of it and drop its dross. As to the influence on me, I will not become a politician or something. But I can (P06 did not finish the sentence). It does not help me in terms of material gains, but I can have my own opinions to certain things. It is not bad to gain spiritual satisfaction.”  **Enrich myself:**  “They (Western countries) can influence other countries with their ideology. It is an ability which is worthy of our learning and studying. So I began to like such things (information about or from the Western countries) since I was a kid. Reading such news enriches me.”  **Know things:**  “I view them and I know them.”  **Tend to believe in Western values:**  “I tend to believe in the Western values. Firstly it is democracy and freedom.”  “It（the Internet） allows me to see news reports at home and abroad so that I can compare Western and Eastern cultures, or ideologies, or world views, or values. Through comparison I know what best suits me. I choose news that stresses the values I choose.” |
| P08 | Reads and searches for further information about social issues | **Better knowledge and understanding:** “Firstly, it (the Internet) lets me know about the incident. I will extensively search information about it and get to understand it.”  **Formation of new ideas, views and one’s own judgement:**  “If something bad happens, we will question our own conscience and denounce it. There will be some ideas and opinions coming out and some new changes.” |
| P09 | Views and analyses information from various sources; learns about arts and things cultivating one’s taste; reads history and inspiring stories. | **Increased amount and variety of knowledge and information, different views and perspectives, broadened view and information channel:**  “The Internet widens my channel of information.”  “Other users’ posts online provide me with conclusions from multi perspectives, which helps with my own reflection.”  “The Internet increases the amount and the range of information and knowledge I obtain.”  “It helps us to know the outside world.” |
| P10 | Views political satires; spread news and comments | **Increased knowledge about the situation in foreign countries:**  “It allows us to know the situation in foreign countries.” |
|  | Views information and comments from various sources | **Better-informed:**  “When something happened, there would be different reports from lots of people online. People could better understand what happened instead of believing what they were told.”  “With the Internet, we are better informed of the current situation in and outside China and new policies of our leaders.” |
| P12 | Reads various news, study online | **Increase the amount of knowledge and broaden our views** |

All the participants, in one way or another, suggested a positive influence of Internet use on the amount and the range or scope of knowledge and information they obtained and the views they developed with a special emphasis on knowledge about the outside world. What did participants think causes the effect? They believed that it was the diversity of information and sources they were exposed to online. The participants attributed the impact of their Internet use on them to three features that are unique to the Internet as a mass medium in China. The first is the ease of access to information from various sources including those located in foreign countries or on blocked websites. The second is its ability to search information around a topic intensively and extensively. The third is the wide availability of user-generated content, especially different perspectives and understandings from different users.

However, the influences that the participants identified might not be attributed to Internet use only, but to the incremental transition in China. Thanks to economic and political reform, there are increasingly diversified social forces with different and often contradicting interests and demands, and they seek various means to express their opinions and protect their rights (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.1). The ideological struggle has been intensified (Zhao, 2008). Deregulation and commercialisation of the media system and other driving forces such as economic and technological development has led to a dramatic development of the media and an increase of autonomy in media operation. As a result, there are a large amount, and a great variety, of content available to Chinese people, which increases their freedom to choose and their chances to encounter different perspectives (see Chapter 2, 2.4.3). Therefore, the online world is a reflection of the increasingly divided and diversified offline world and the influences such as increased amount of knowledge and information, broadened views, raised doubts, and offered more choices of values, coming from both the online and offline world.

However, there are features unique to the Internet in China. Firstly, the Internet goes beyond the state boundary. Although the party-state tries to create a Chinese Internet for its people and to filter the content that flows into the Chinese Internet, it only blocks the content recognised as ‘negative’, ‘harmful’ or ‘damaging’ to the current system. Internet users in China can access various information located outside China, even that on blocked websites. Although in reality, a very small proportion of Internet users do so, they make what they obtain from outside China available on the Chinese Internet (see Table 35). Therefore, it is plausible to argue that the Internet helps its users to know the world outside China better than traditional media as the participants suggested.

Secondly, the Internet allows its users to generate and share content, which makes available a wide variety of information and views and increases the difficulty of control. P09 said, “other users’ posts online provide me with conclusions from multi perspectives, which helps with my own reflection.” P10 said,“when something happened, there would be different reports from lots of people online. People could better understand what happened instead of believing what they were told.” The Wenzhou Train Crash is a good example. Sina Weibo users posted messages about the crash almost immediately after the accident and a total of 26 million messages about the tragedy were posted across Chinese microblogging platforms while railway officials tried to cover up the accident (see Table 72).

Finally, the social networking capacity of the Internet is where user-generated content faces a credibility crisis. Content generated by users who know each other is often absorbed without any doubt and it becomes an important source of information for Internet users, for example, content generated by the participants’ friends, classmates, family members, and travel friends. P06 made such a point explicit. He said, “I pay special attention to what they see and hear in America or Holland. I take it as a window for me to the outside world” (see Table 60). The Internet allows daily interpersonal communication between and among people located far apart from each other with multi-media. The author argues that such information exchange provides Internet users opportunities to experience different cultures and to encounter different values and perspectives, encourages them to compare and reflect, and thus makes it more difficult for the party-state to control information flow and manipulate understanding and interpretation of meanings. Other economic, political, and social changes amplify online interpersonal communication. The number of people who travel has increased dramatically thanks to the development of the tourist industry. The number of Chinese overseas students has also increased remarkably since 1978 (see Chapter 2, 2.4.3) as a result of opening-up policies and the rapidly enhanced living standards. Urbanisation and the reform of registration policies encourage nationwide migration. The Chinese people have been given more and more opportunities to travel and have increasing freedom to choose where to base themselves as the transition moves on. As a result, they also have more friends and family members who are located in various places and cultures.

In addition, such features of the Internet force traditional media to catch up due to commercialisation of the media system in China and intense competition among different media for audience and also for influence.

Does the Internet really influence the participants in the ways they claimed? The question will be further elaborated on in Chapter 6, 6.4.3.

*Table 83. Internet’s effect on participants’ behaviour*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | What I do | Influence on my behaviour |
| P01 | Read without deep thinking or memorising: “I am such a person who reads, and forgets without deeply exploring a question.”  “I only read in most cases, and read often for the sake of reading.”  “It is because of my personality and (limited horizon) that makes me not think over.”  “I read many things just for the sake of reading, and forget afterward.” | **Be unconsciously influenced:** “I believe that if I know more things, at certain moment, I believe (P01 did not finish the sentence.). Lots of thing, you read about. Although you cannot recall them, they are in your mind. You will know what to do, when someday, when you encounter something.”  “The influence on my behaviour is subtle and I have been influenced unconsciously over a long period of time. I do not know what the influence is.”  **“I want to do what is advocated online, but never really did one**.” |
| P02 |  | **Make more new friends**;  **Limited effect:** “(My Internet use) has effect on me, but cannot substantially change me.” |
| P03 | Read, think, but do not comment | **Communication skill:** “I think that it (communication skill) will be improved if you communicate much online.”  **Information search ability:** “For example, I read reports of rampant rip-offs by Sanya tourist trade… if I will go to the place, I will get to know more about the place by searching information through more channels and methods, and try not be cheated and exploited.” |
| P05 | “The Internet is alluring, and time-consuming. For example chatting on the phone takes several minutes while chatting on QQ takes several hours.” | **An accumulating and unconscious influence on my thinking:** “There may be an leavening accumulating and unconscious influence on my thinking. There are many things that you yourself do not know, but there is a slow and gradual influence, something unnoticeable to yourself.” |
| P06 | Chat, hang out and travel with online friends | **Meet various people and visit lots of places** |
| Read political news and critiques from different sources,  Climb over the Great Wall to view blocked content | **Ability to synthesise various information and opinions and build my own opinions:**  “Both domestic and foreign media are one-sided, you need to synthesise them.” |
| P07 |  | **Information search ability;**  **Networking skills and ability:** Use the Internet to communicate with friends and to find old friends. |
| P08 | Read and search further information about social issues | **Better conscience and conduct:** “If something bad happens, we will question our own conscience and denounce it. There will be some ideas and opinions coming out and some new changes. If it is something good, we will praise and learn from it.”  **Information search ability;**  **Networking skills and ability:** use the Internet to chat or see friends or family. |
| P09 | View and analyse information from various sources; learn about arts and things cultivating one’s taste; read history and inspiring stories. | **Ability to see from multi-perspective, to think critically:** “By comparing information from different online sources, I may see an issue from more perspectives.” “Through the Internet, I can obtain some information from foreign websites by climbing over the Great Wall. I just think that the conclusion may be different when seeing one thing from another perspective.”  “I compare what I learned from domestic official websites with what I learned from foreign websites comprehensively.”  **Information search ability;**  **Networking skills and ability:** The first step online is chatting, a way to keep in touch with others.  **Ability to be critical:** checked whether or not the message he read online was true.  **Ability to see from different perspectives:** “Other users’ posts online provide me with conclusions from multi perspectives.”; “enables me to see a problem from more perspectives’; “there may be another conclusion from another perspective’.  **Ability to think independently:**  “helps with my own reflection”; “and then I can draw my own conclusion”. |
| P10 | View political satires; spread news and comments | **Usually no effect:**  “In terms of action, usually there is no effect, because I am obedient.”  Networking skills and ability; |
| View information from various sources and comments | **Ability to be critical:** “With the Internet, you are provided with different people’s reports and will not simply believe what you are told.” |
| P11 |  | **Networking skills and ability;**  **Information search ability;**  **Ability to see from different perspectives:** used various news websites for news and she also thought that Baidu provided different ideas and suggestions from lots of people. |

The participants are classified into two groups: those who could not name or identify how their Internet usage affected their behaviours including P01 and P05, and those who could including P02, P03, P06, P07, P08, P09, P10, and P11. P01 and P05 believed that there was an accumulating influence on their behaviours or their thinking, but they could not name it. In terms of their Internet usage, they both seemed allured by the Internet and spent much time on the Internet without any clear purpose. P01 also said that ‘he wanted to do what was advocated online, but never really did one’, which indicates that his Internet use inspired him, but was not inspiring enough for him to take any real action.

*Table 84. Internet’s effect on participants’ attitude*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | What I do | On attitude |
| P09 | View and analyse information from various sources; learn about arts and things cultivating one’s taste; read history and inspiring stories. | **Better taste; positive attitude; sometimes attitude changes;**  **Sometimes confusion:**  “With a rapid increase in the amount of information, sometimes you do not know what is right.”  1. Challenges to one’s common sense, old views  2. Conflicts of different ideas, perspectives  3. Tolerance  4. Positive spirit  5. A new view of history and facts: “If you want to know what the Party has done in those years, you need to read *The History of Communist Party of China* written by the Soviet Union. Only by doing so, you could learn comparatively all aspects of the truth. It will challenge our old views. We are too ignorant.”  6. Formation of new ideas, views and one’s own judgement  7. View of news: “News is closely related to politics in any country. In communist countries including the former Soviet Union, Germany when Hitler was in power, the Party controls every aspects of news production. Probably it is different in Europe. It is probably not controlled by an authoritarian political system. However, in fact, it is closely related to economic groups and political families.”  8. Belief in the power of the Internet in politics in terms of promoting democracy  9. Worries about the negative effect: “The Internet is uncontrollable and may lead to uncontrollable situation.”  10. Through the Internet, the influence of the government and the public is mutual.  11. “The direction of the influence depends on the majority who know little and care nothing more than their own interests like the other participants.”  12. Understand the Government’s censorship: “The Chinese people would simply copy what Tunisian people had done without deep thinking.”  13. People’s way of thinking will change dramatically.  14. “There are lots of readers online, but they choose to be silent. For if you voice out your opinion online, you will be exposed to group attack of words. Finally you are categorised into two groups: the 50 Cent Party or the Dailu Party.” |
| P10 | View political satires; spread news and comments | Doubt about the current political system in China and favour of the Western democracy:  “After viewing (political satires), I began to question about my old opinions. Before I thought the policies in our country were very good. After viewing those videos, I think that policies in Western countries are better than ours. The doubt arose. By comparison, I think, I have such an idea that we should adopt the Western policies. It only affects my opinions.” |

Special attention should be paid to the effect of viewing political satire, or humour in general. Humour or something funny or humorous has been mentioned by the participants as an important part of the content they read online (see for example, Tables 28, 33 & 35). What is so significant about humour or satire? ‘Humour is not a mood, but a way to observe the world’ (Marolt, 2014, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014, p.4). Humour is also a main means of subverting hierarchy and authority (p.5), and a means of ‘criticising officials and official ideologies’ (Benney, 2017, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014, p.34). According to P10’s understanding, such a means of subverting and criticising does have an effect. Viewing political satires, news and comments online was believed by P10 to have aroused his doubt about the current political system in China and he began to favour Western democracy.

The author also wants to draw attention to the perceived confusion caused by a rapid increase in the amount of information. P09 said, “with a rapid increase of the amount of information, sometimes you do not know what is right.” The informants of Cockain (2014, p.59, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014) expressed the same concern. “The Internet also makes us confused. When you are surrounded by so much information, it’s hard to identify what is right or wrong” (p.59). The author argues that such a confusion marks a step forward in the development of Chinese Internet users’ critical apparatus. Confusion encourages people to doubt and suspect what they are told and taught, instead of following it blindly. And thus people realise the need for them to ‘have the ability to discriminate between truth and untruth’ as Cockain’s informant put it (Cocktain, 2014, p.59, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014).

P09 dominated the discussion of the political influence of the Internet in the focus group. He talked lengthily about the topic. For some attitudes he said he had, it is hard for the researcher to tell whether he believed that they were the results of his Internet use.

## 5.3 Understanding of online comments and user-generated content

This section presents findings of how a participant understands online comments and user-generated content. It addresses the following questions. Why did the participants read or not read online comments or user-generated content? What kinds of comments did they read? How did they evaluate online comments or user-generated content?

*Table 85. Understanding of online comments and user-generated content I*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Why to (not to) read comments | What to read |
| P01 | **Read to clear one’s own thought: “**I feel something when I read it (news or commentaries), but I cannot describe how I feel about it. I feel that this is what I think when I read the comments.” | **Long comments:** “I read paragraph-sized long comments, and overlook comments of a few words.” |
| P03 |  | “I read comments.”  Sometimes read information about government corruption in online forums |
| P04 | Renren: view photos and pictures only, “Other classmates may post about their status and share news. I do not care much about what others post. I am not interested in videos they share. I just view photos and do not want to view other things.”  Comments: “I usually do not care about others’ comments. Instead I just read what happened. That is it.” |  |
| P06 | To read: Value one’s own views.  “I value one’s own views. It is better to have one’s own opinions of things instead of standardised reports or statements.” | Comments on Weibo, Baidu tieba |
| P09 | Different stance and different perspective:  “Because you will analyse an issue from a different perspective because you take a different stance.” | View information from different sources |

The participants suggested three reasons to read others’ comments online. First, others’ comments were believed by P01 to help him to clarify his own thoughts. Second, one’s own views and opinions were believed by P06 to be valuable. Others’ comments were also believed by P09 to help to see different perspectives resulting from different stances.

*Table 86. Understanding of online comments and user-generated content II*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Understanding of online comments | Understanding of extreme comments |
| P01 | **Re-evaluate comments with his own judgement:** “I will think with my own understandings when I read others’ comments.”  **Comments are not neutral:** “As to comments, I think that lots of comments are made because of writers’ (who write the comments) own interests, needs or other factors.” | **Against extreme comments:** “Extreme comments do not see a problem from two sides, but from one side. It is inappropriate. Posting extreme comments is childish. Those who post extreme comments are those who do not know much about the background and neither do they have much knowledge.” |
| P02 | Who comment online:  “Most people do not (make comments) online. (It is) very likely that they think as we do. We do not want to make improper comments. I feel that peers around me also do not make comments online, because registration is inconvenient.”  (Those commenting online are) fanciers, from different backgrounds, or loyal users of the website such as a movie review website. | People are blind: not objective, do not see two sides, outlet of grievances |
| P03 | Insist on his own view: “I think that comments are coloured by subjectivity. So I think that my judgment will be influenced if I read comments. I read comments, but usually I do not accept their opinions. Usually I do not accept the opinions of online comments. I have my own opinions.”  “I feel that opinions online completely contradict with mine. I think that most of their comments are nonsense (irresponsible remarks). Take the Wang Lijun Incident for example. They know nothing about the truth.” | Not trustworthy: “If they completely agree or disagree with something, I think that those people probably hold a hostile attitude toward certain things, or they are hired to promote, for example, sell something… extreme comments are not trustworthy.” |
| P05 | Cannot be relied on for election: “Information online is complex. Some is real; some is false; some is bad; and some is good. If you need to know somebody to tell if he/she can be a representative, I cannot trust online information that much. Of course, there are some I can trust, but not that much.” |  |
| P06 | Score 85 to 90 out of 100.  “Some are good and some are not good. As a whole, I give 85 to 90…. Most I read are good. There are some negative, or what I consider bad comments. For example, someone posted a comparison of income in China and America, what is the percentage of the cost of viewing an IMAX of *Avatar* in their income and said that the rising of commodity price and inflation in China was a bit scary. Some people will make comments like (you do not know) how to appreciate the happy life you enjoy, or the moon in foreign countries is full. Such comments, I think, are nonsense. The tweet, I think, just states a fact. This is the real situation in America.” |  |
| P09 | A suspicious attitude toward all online content because of irresponsible retweeting and comments and distortion of information dissemination online.  Still relies on online resources from various sources to eliminate doubts. | Online labelling silences people. |

P01, P03, P05 and P09 expressed a sceptical attitude toward online user-generated content and comments. Two reasons they suggested contribute to their sceptical attitude. The participants believed that ‘online comments were coloured by subjectivity’ or ‘lots of comments were made because of writers’ own interests, needs or other factors’. P03 mentioned a career or employment in China called water army soldiers. ‘Public relation companies in China provide water army services to any corporation wanting to boost their online image or undermine the reputation of competitors’. They hire people, so-called water army soldieries, to ‘generate floods of articles, comments or links with specific contents in certain web spaces’ (Jin & Herold, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014, p.111). The existence of such services contributes to skepticism towards online user-generated content. Therefore, they read comments while thinking their own ideas and in most cases insisted on their own judgement. Moreover, participants believed that there was irresponsible retweeting and comments and distortion of information dissemination online. Despite the sceptical attitude, they still read online comments and ‘relied on online resources from various sources to eliminate doubts’ according to their accounts. This means that they doubt some content online and utilise various online resources to eliminate that doubt.

P06 displayed high trust in online comments and content and scored 85 to 90 out of 100. The example of bad comments he gave illustrates his dissatisfaction with the Chinese government and the situation in China and his longing for the life of Western countries.

P01, P02, and P03 all held a negative attitude toward extreme comments online. They did not consider extreme comments trustworthy.

When comparison is made between the participants’ attitudes toward different sources of information online, it is clear that most participants considered Chinese commercial news portals, Chinese government news portals (see Tables 13 & 16), and elites (see Table 33) more trustworthy than anonymous individual users (see Table 86). Most participants expressed their trust in online news (see Table 16) and their preference for following elites on Weibo (see Table 33). P01, P02, P03, P05 and P09 articulated clear distrust in anonymous individual users and deemed them irrational, extreme, blind, subjective, unable to see a problem from two sides, emotional, ignorant, or irresponsible. It is evident that those participants took an elitist view regarding who are qualified as the people to rule (see Chapter 2, 2.2.2) and what constitutes a public sphere (see Chapter 2, 2.2.5). Their attitudes towards different information sources online implicate their favour of authorities and distrust in members of the society. It also indicates that these participants were unwilling to accommodate others. They did not recognise that online ‘irrational’ or ‘extreme’ expression was democratic or that an expression of individuals’ interests and needs was democratic. Findings of the comparison demonstrate that some pro-authoritarian values and beliefs (see Chapter 2, 2.2.3) prevailed among the participants. It is unclear whether the prevalence of the pro-authoritarian values and beliefs among the participants results from their use of the Internet. However, it is evident that their Internet use did not help to challenge such values or beliefs.

## 5.4 Disbelief in relevance of social problems

Political socialisation refers to the process through which individuals acquire political orientation and position within the broader socio-political structures (Gerodimos, 2010, p.23). This section displays one aspect of political socialisation: how participants understood the effect of social problems on them. It addresses the following questions. Did they think that the social issues or problems they read about online affect them? On what aspects are they affected if they thought that they did? For what reasons did they read information about social issues online?

*Table 87. Participants’ belief in irrelevance of social problems*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Social problems |
| P01 | Low influence: “What I concern (online) now does not affect my future life or work much.”  “The existing problems (reported online) do not affect my life much. They are far away from me.”  “It is uncommon to experience a bullet train accident. It is unavoidable if it happens to me.” |
| P03 | Low influence: “As to my interests, there is no significant influence.” |
| P04 | Price of commodities: “As to big affairs, I only retweeted about the rise of oil price. I just think that the price of commodities is too high in China.”  Social inequality & social apathy: “I think that it is of no use to retweet about other issues which involve inequality. Anyway it is of no use to say anything. It does not change anything.”  “I think that they (reports about social problems) will still stir up feelings of discontent in me, but I think that I will probably forget about it soon. Probably I think why they are so cold-blooded and this is unfair at that moment and will probably forget it tomorrow….I will not think deep about it, nor do I make comments.” |
| P05 | Consider effect, not see relevance:  Train crash: “I feel a bit sad, a bit indignant, and together a bit funny, three in one.”  Asked whether or not she would participate if someone calls to amend The Law of Food Security:  “I am not an initiative person. Probably I will not, if I need to organise it. But it is hard to imagine whether or not I will take a part. I may because I think that it is a good thing and I am willing to do it. But I probably will not do it, because I do not think that there will be effect. I think that there will be no effect if it is just a small organisation. I may be a part if it turns out in a large scale.” |

The participants did not think that the social or political issues or problems exposed online affected their life, work, self-development, interests, or material gains. P04 did not say it explicitly, but her tendency toward topics that are of direct influence on her life is obvious when she gave examples of what topics she retweeted on her Weibo. She retweeted about the rise of the oil price instead of news about social inequality and social apathy. When talking about the Train Crash and an assumption about participating in activities to amend the Law of Food Security, P05 also demonstrated signs of not seeing the relevance. In both cases she talked about, she did not express concern about the security or health risks she faced because of the current public transportation management and the Law of Food Security. The author argues that the disbelief in the relevance of social problem to them contributes partly to the participants’ political disengagement. The argument will be elaborated on in Chapter 6, 6.2.4.

*Table 88. Belief in moral high ground or self-discipline*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Moral high ground or self-discipline |
| P02 | Expressed high moral ground:(When asked the relevance of social problems, social events, international relationship to society and to him)  “From a macroscopic view, the interest of the nation is the interests of an individual.”  “I think that everybody should help others regardless of the consequences.” |
| P03 | Expressed high moral ground:(When asked the relevance of social problems, social events, international relationship to society and to him)  “I think that it could increase national unity. When the public know about the issues, they will feel passionate and then they will think in a similar manner.” |
| P05 | See environmental protection as self-discipline: “Probably because I have my own disciplines of conduct. For example, bins are divided into recyclable and non-recyclable in my university. One bin may be easier to use because it has a hole at the top. Usually I stick to my principle and throw the waste into the one where it should be instead of choosing an easier solution. I have my own principles.” |
| P06 | Spiritual satisfaction:  “As to the influence on me, I will not become a politician or something, but I can, it does not help me in terms of material gains, but I can have my own opinions to certain things. It is not bad to gain spiritual satisfaction.” |

Common reasons or motivations participants expressed for their concern about social or political issues are moral, or so-called social conscience, self-discipline and spiritual satisfaction.

*Table 89. Lack of ethics of animal research and product*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Ethics of animal research and products |
| P01 | No sense of ethics of research and products: “I do not think that it is cruel to take the gall out of a living bear. You see, if you need bear galls … it is something must needed, then you must take from them. There must be ways to take them. I will not think about if it is cruel.” |

P01’s understanding of the news about Guizhentang live bear bile extracting demonstrates that he did not have a sense of ethics about research and products.

## 5.5 Understanding of censorship

This section presents findings of how a participant understands the influence of censorship on him/her, and what is censored, and the attitude of a participant toward censorship.

*Table 90. Understanding of censorship: influence of censorship on the participant*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Influence of censorship on the participant | | |
| On online information consumption | On online expression | On understanding of politically sensitive content |
| P01 | **No effect:** “Once I heard about 3rd of September Student Movements (or the so-called Tiananmen Square protest of 1989) and searched online. I found that one could hardly find any information online.”  “If I receives (politically sensitive content), I will tell my roommates as something funny.” | **Complex and contradicting:** On the one hand, the participant denies the effect of censorship on his online expression and claims in most cases, he just does not feel necessary to express himself.  On the other hand, he admits the effect of censorship. (“I heard that university students were asked to ‘have a talk’ because of radical comments. I think that it affects what I say online. I will be more cautious and will not say things that, I feel, will bring bad effect to me.”) | **Exaggerating effect** (doubt or mistrust): “I always suspect that the situation must be very serious when there are rumours about what happens in Xinjiang (province).” |
| P02 | P02 claims that censorship would have no effect on him.  “I would think about the consequences after I did it. That is my personality.” “I will not think about what consequence it will bring if I do so (do something against the censorship).”  However, P02 did not mention any reading, searching or expressing of politically sensitive content throughout the interview. | | |
| P03 |  | Make no comments on politics: “I think that it is better not to comment on such issues (the Wang Lijun Incident and government corruption), because there may be certain consequences if you do. Anything political is complicated. Someone may inquiry you if you make comments. I just read, and never make comments on anything political.” | Influence truth: Influence my understanding of truth.  “Currently it (censorship) has no significant influence on me.” |
| P04 | “My parents checked Lianhe Zaobo online for information about the Wang Lijun Incident when relevant news was blocked in mainland China.” | “But I dared not to tell others. To tell others such things, you know the situation in China, well, is of no use, and (you) might be sent to prison. So, usually (I) do not make improper comments, just and talk at home.” | Arouse curiosity |
| P05 | Low influence: “There is not much influence to someone like me who do not use the Internet a lot, nor do I use the forum a lot. There is hardly any effect.” | Influence: “The Internet really provides us a good platform to express ourselves, but after all currently the censorship is strict. Some words will be blocked. In this regard, the Internet does not allow us to express ourselves fully.” |  |
| P06 | No influence:  “I concern about if what I read is too politically sensitive. In China, speech is not as free as in USA. I sometimes worried about surveillance when climbing over the Great Wall and would turn the page off right after viewing and would not make any comments. (Censorship) does not affect what I view.”  “While I am in my dormitory, I view politically sensitive news on bed. Usually I view news on the desk and roommates can have a look while passing by.” | Influenced:  “But it does affect what I retweet and tweet… but I concern about if I will be spotted if I retweet it, so I would not retweet or make comments.”  “One of my posts was deleted once and then I dare not to post something sensitive.” “I felt the power of democracy and I was inspired. And then I tweeted it on Weibo. It was deleted. I was scared and then dare not to do so.” | Controlled and directed:  “At the same time, online public opinion must have been manipulated. The government has its mouthpiece which leads and controls the direction of public opinion.” |
| P07 | Affected:  “I climbed over (the Great Wall) once. It was a website recommended by a friend of mine. I viewed once. I do not remember what the website is because I viewed only once. I had a look by climbing over the Great Wall. The comments on some events are shocking. Their views are completely different from and contradict what we learned from domestic websites. I was shocked at the moment and shut it down without further reading.” |  |  |
| P08 | Not significant: “As to such content (politically sensitive) you read it and know it. That’s enough.” | Significant |  |
| P09 | Climbed over the Great Wall to access blocked websites |  |  |
| P10 | View political satires favouring Western values |  |  |
| P12 | No effect: “My roommate sometimes views them (politically sensitive content) on Renren. Usually we just view them, but dare not to retweet them.” | Effect: “He did not send them to us even when we asked him. He said that the content was politically sensitive.” When P12 being asked why not retweet, the answer is “self-protection.” |  |

Most participants did not think that Internet censorship was a major reason affecting their choice of what to read online. Censorship did not stop most of them from searching for or reading about politically sensitive content online. P07 did not explicitly claim that she had been affected by censorship. But she reported that she had the experience of stopping herself from further reading of certain content because she thought that the content was too shocking and greatly contradicted her common knowledge. Her experience and understanding demonstrates that she was unwilling to leave her comfort zone. She preferred to stay in an information environment created by the content selected by herself and the party-state to reinforce her existing views and refused to step into the world with information and ideas that challenge her common knowledge.

The researcher assumes that her online information consumption has been affected in one way or another by censorship. One possible explanation is that she considered the content too politically sensitive and thus stopped reading to avoid being spied on and punished. Another is that she could not accept such shocking or contradicting content because her common knowledge learned in a controlled ideational environment has never been challenged in such a way due to censorship. Moreover, the party-state strategically leads the interpretation of such information by demonising unauthorised information sources (see Table 58).

While most participants believed that their choice of what to read online had not been affected by censorship, it is evident that censorship affected what they could find or read online. Moreover, the influence of Internet censorship on online deliberation is also evident. As to the influence of censorship on their understanding of politically sensitive content, two effects were identified by participants: arousing doubt and curiosity.

*Table 91. Understanding of censorship: attitude to censorship*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Attitude to censorship |
| P01 | **Complex:** “I think that the government should not do so (censor online content). I am unable to give reasons. People will still know although the government blocks the news.”  “On the other hand, I think that there are things that the government cannot let you know in term of management. It is understandable. The ruling class must control the information (like the 3rd of September Student Movements).” |
| P02 | Neutral position:  “I think that as to censorship, we should take a neutral stance. Filtering has both positive and negative effects. Most content filtered must be false information, such as such widespread (unfinished), such negative information, for example, something anti-party or anti-nation, information that influences social structure or leads to social instability, and information that brings dramatic negative effect to society Those information must be filtered. Filtering the facts of current affairs affects my judgment of the issue.” |
| P03 | Negative:  “I think that censorship is not good, because it restrains free expression.”  “I think that currently the government does not let all news out.” “If it does, certainly it will (unfinished), some news will harm the interests of the government; some will not.” |
| P05 | Do not care: “I do not really care, unless I am not in a good mood. Usually I do not care. There is a tight place in my heart, but I am not really bothered.” |
| P06 | Afraid and find it a defect of political system:  “Media censorship, I think, exists in China, and it is strict. One cannot (unfinished) in terms of politics. It is a defect.” |
| P08 | Consider it as an important mean to oppress the opposite power:  “It (AlJazeera) sometimes reports the inside stories of a plot and uncovers the real bad person behind the surface. I think that there is no such a power in China. There is no entity or individual powerful enough to counterbalance the government. So censorship is a very important measure.” |
| P09 | “It is normal. Every country has it, just in different forms. It is hard to tell it is good or bad in general.”  **Why censorship: “**The public may blindly follow the trend without analysing or deep thinking”:  The uncertainty of the consequences |
| P10 | View it as a negative side of the Internet |

The participants’ attitude towards Internet censorship fell into four categories: negative, neutral, complex, and unconcerned. P03, P06, P08 and P10 held a negative attitude. Censorship is seen as not good, a defect of the political system or an important means to oppress any opposition. It is believed to restrain free expression and make it impossible for the existence of powers to counterbalance the power of the government. P02 and P09 believed that they took a neutral stance. P02 believed that filtering had both positive and negative effects. And he also believed that most content filtered must be false information. It is important to note that P02’s understanding of what is negative information and what should be filtered echoes the party-state’s definition of negative information. P09 regarded censorship as normal. He believed that every country had it, just in different forms. P01 had a complex feeling about censorship. On the one hand, he thought that the government should not censor online content, and he believed that people would still know when the government blocked the news. On the other hand, he considered censorship understandable from the perspective of management. P05 expressed her unconcern about Internet censorship.

Although every participant knew the negative effects of censorship, still three participants held a neutral attitude or a complex feeling towards censorship. Pornography, cyber crimes, credibility crisis of online content, and a loud announcement of ‘Internet freedom’ or ‘cyber cold war’ by the American government (Morozov, 2011) give the Chinese government good reasons for strict censorship.

*Table 92. Understanding of censorship: what is censored?*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Understanding of what is censored |
| P01 | Information about social instability, such as riots;  Information that ruins the image of the government. |
| P02 | Big, current politically sensitive information; information that leads to negative influence |
| P05 | Your file will first be censored if you upload something online.  Some words will be shown as XX when you chat online, for example, Mao Zedong. |
| P06 | “Content that condemns the Communist Party. Nothing else, in particular.”  Stricter than before:  “Now the surveillance of Weibo is stricter. Some Weibo services start the real name registration. Some politically sensitive speech will be deleted right after it is posted…It would be deleted before, but it is not that strict. Especially at the very beginning before Weibo began to thrive, censorship was not strict. Nobody expected that Weibo became so powerful. Now the surveillance is very strict. And after the train crash, it became very strict.”  Ok with topics of people’s welfare, but not politics:  “In China, many things, it is only free to talk about issues of people’s welfare. I think that the media censorship is very strict. Political topics are not (unfinished).” |
| P09 | Tunisia revolution, the Arab Spring |
| P10 | Misconduct of law enforcement officers |
| P12 | What is new (different from mainstream orientation): “I think that what is new will be harmonised during the process of dissemination. It will really be harmonised. There may be some small changes that are not significant to make a difference. The small changes, something new but small, are not different from what was there. They will be deleted if they deviate just a little bit far.” |

The participants believed that there were two types of censorship. One is conducted systematically by the government as an institution to filter out content that would challenge the authority of the current government and undermine the values, beliefs, and ideas supporting the current system. The other is carried out by powerful government or party officials to cover their misconduct. The Chinese ‘authorities have signalled that they are increasing controls and targeting popular users’ (Branigan, 2013, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014, p.20). P06 seemed to have received the signal when he commented that the surveillance of Weibo was stricter.

*Table 93. Understanding of censorship: privacy concern*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ref | Privacy concern |
| In-depth interview participants | Not mention politically sensitive content as privacy while using the Internet in their domitories. |
| P08 | Id. |
| P10 | Id. |
| P12 | Id. |

In-depth interview participants were asked whether or not they considered certain content private or inappropriate to be seen by their roommates while using the Internet in their dormitories. If yes, what is the content? The questions aim to find out if the participants consider politically sensitive topics inappropriate to share among their roommates or if they think that it will bring negative influence to them when roommates find them reading politically sensitive content online. There was not a single participant who mentioned politically sensitive content as private or something they would hide away from their roommates. Three focus group participants also showed that they did not consider politically sensitive content as inappropriate topics among their roommates. Instead, they shared with their roommates politically sensitive content offline (see Table 67).

## 5.6 Attitude toward government corruption

The section presents participants’ understanding of and attitude toward government corruption in China.

*Table 94. Attitude toward government corruption*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Attitude toward government corruption | | |
| P01 | Severity of government corruption: | Reasons of corruption exposure | Attitude |
| “I think that it (government corruption in China) is normal. This (government corruption) is the current situation.” | Bad luck or result of offending superior officials: “I will think that it (corrupted government official being caught and exposed) is because of bad luck. As to bad luck, he might offend a superior official, or…” | Dissatisfaction: “In my heart, I want these corrupted governmental officials be dealt with.”  “I think that it (government corruption in China) is normal. However, I don’t like it. That is why I follow news about people’s welfares[[80]](#footnote-80). Because there are relatively more such reports. When I read such reports, I feel pleasant in my heart about that they are caught and exposed.”  (Question: Why do you concern about news about people’s welfares so much?) “Probably because in my heart I am dissatisfied with such things in China and want to read others’ critiques about it.” |
| P07 | Government corruption is severe in China. |  |  |

Both P01 and P07 thought that government corruption was severe in China. P01 regarded it as a normal phenomenon in China. P01 did not attribute media exposure of government corruption to the government’s effort, but to bad luck or offending superior officials. It indicates that he did not believe in the party-state’s discourse of its anti-corruption efforts. And he explicitly expressed his dislike of government corruption.

# Chapter 6: Discussion

## 6.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 have presented findings concerning twelve participants’ use of the Internet and their perceptions of the Internet, their Internet use and the influence. Chapter 6 addresses the objective of identifying patterns of political significance in Internet use through exploring the relationship between the categories and subcategories, situating and contextualising the findings in Chinese society (see Objective 3, Chapter 1, 1.2), and critically reflecting the findings within the theoretical framework of democratisation (see Objective 4, Chapter 1, 1.2). It consists of five core findings of the study. Section 6.2 analyses the phenomenon of online political disengagement found to be common among the participants in terms of consumption of political information, political deliberation and participation and explores the factors that contribute to such a phenomenon from the perspective of participants. Censorship and civic culture are found to be the most important two constraints. Section 6.3 interprets the democratising power of political disengagement and mass entertainment in light of ideational pluralism and argues that participants’ Internet use poses a threat to the cultivation of a pro-authoritarian political culture or a tame ideational climate and generates discontent with the current situation, longing for better life, and belief in a better alternative. It is also argued that many other factors determine whether or not online entertainment and political disengagement are ways to liberate or to control. Section 6.4 demonstrates how the participants understood the influence of Internet use on them and reflects on their understandings within the theoretical framework of democracy and political efficacy. Section 6.5 attempts to answer three questions. Is climbing over the Great Wall a technical matter or a matter of interest or motivation? Will climbing over the Great Wall change the user’s perspective about the political system? Will climbing over the Great Wall make the user more politically active? Section 6.6 explores how the Internet casts its influence in ways beyond the Internet and in the domains beyond politics. Offline civic talk about online content and civic associations at private level is found to be common among the participants, which, the researcher argues, marks a rise of civil society.

## 6.2 Political disengagement and why

### 6.2.1 Introduction

One of the objectives is to identify patterns of political significance in Internet use from the participants’ perspective. Drawn from previous studies and participants’ understanding, patterns of political significance in this study involve three aspects: political information consumption referring to the consuming of political information including news, commentaries, opinions, ideas etc.; political deliberation referring to sharing and generating political information and discussing political topics; and political participation referring to participating in political activities or organisations through the Internet; and other online activities that the participants reported as political. The results of data analysis demonstrate that using the Internet for political purposes is not uncommon, but accounts for only a very small proportion of all participants’ online activities. Namely, the study finds that the participants were politically disengaged online.

The findings of the study suggests that while the Internet has a role in providing users with accessible and effective tools though constrained by the government control, the root cause of participant’s online political disengagement maybe lie in the civic culture. Censorship was found to affect participants’ political deliberation, but not good at explaining low consumption of political information and a general lack of political participation. In addition to censorship, three other factors contributing to online political disengagement have been found. They are disbelief in relevance of social problems, belief in a shock therapy, and lack of civic organisations and activities. Disbelief in relevance of social problems refers to the phenomenon that individuals do not see or think that the social problems or issues exposed online affect their life or development. Belief in a shock therapy refers to individuals’ tendency to believe democratisation as a revolutionary overturn from the current system to a democratic government and comprehensive dismantling of the institutions of Communist Party rule, not as an incremental evolution or reform. Lack of civic organisations and activities refers to the phenomenon that there is a lack of organisations and activities actively approaching university students and providing channels or ways easily accessible for the university students to involve themselves in politics.

### 6.2.2 Political disengagement

According to the data, political information consumption was frequent and regular, but only accounts for a small proportion of all participants’ online activities; political deliberation occurred occasionally, or seldom occurred; while political participation was a rare thing.

Every participant reported regular consumption of political information. Regular news reading was found to be common among all participants (see Table 13), but only consuming a small proportion of the time participants spent online. The majority of participants’ online hours were consumed by networking and entertainment (see Tables 11 & 12). Every participant reported reading social and political news online except for P07 and P11 who were not specific about what news they read (see Table 15). However, social and political news is only a part of the news that they read, they also read soft news (see Table 15). Moreover, Shen and Liang’s (2014) web data analysis finds that social and political news always ranks the last in terms of both visit frequency and duration. Another important source of political information is social networking applications’ public space, mainly Sina Weibo or Qzone. Five out of twelve participants reported that they read political information on Weibo, but the proportion of such content was small and the frequency of encountering such content was low (see Tables 33 & 35). In addition, search engines were reported as a tool to search for further information about news and comments they read (see Table 18). University intranet, especially its BBS, has been found to become an important platform for some participants to learn about university. The most important motivation for using the university intranet was found to be surveillance, including to know the university and ‘to be aware of what is going on around me’ (see Table 44). Analysis of participants’ reports did not provide much information about their use of other Internet applications as sources of social and political information. Online forums (see Table 46), Renren (see Table 67), QQ contacts (see Table 22), and QQ group (see Table 25) have also been reported as sources of political information, though such a usage is not found frequent or common among the participants.

Sharing of political information is found not to be frequent, but not unusual among the participants; generating political content like comments and original tweets unusual; discussion of political topics uncommon among the participants online, but common offline with their peers or family (see Tables 36, 37, 66 & 67). It is important to note that there are not many details about Internet use of the focus group participants. Four participants of in-depth interviews reported that they retweeted about politics, but none of the participants reported frequent retweeting of political content (see Table 37). Moreover, politics, like social issues and history, either constitutes a very small proportion of what participants shared and generated, or has never been shared or generated (see Table 66). Only P02 and P06 reported that they commented on current affairs. All participants expect for P10 who has not said anything about it, explicitly declared that they just read about politics, but did not make any comments (see Tables 61 to 65). P01 reported that he would write something he knew on campus BBS (see Table 45). Discussion of political topics is found to be uncommon online. P06 reported that he interacted with his followers on new current affairs in China and discussed the problems in China on Weibo (see Table 40). P09 claimed that he had never shared political news or articles on a public platform, but he discussed history and politics with a special group of people online (see Table 66). Discussion of political topics is found to be common offline, but only occurring sometimes or occasionally. Participants 01, 02, 03, 04 (at home because she lived at home with her parents), 08, and 12 all reported discussing political content they read online with their roommates and classmates in their dormitory or (in ther case of P04) with her family at home (see Table 67).

Online political participation is found to be rare among the participants. All twelve participants were asked to list all their online activities and no one except for P06 reported any online political participation. The only political participation P06 reported is online petitions on some social issues (see Table 49). Online petitions on social issues, as reported by P06, is a new form of political participation. It may possess potentially political significance in China since it is convenient and safe.

What did participants think contributes to the phenomenon of political disengagement online? In addition to censorship, the study identifies other three important factors.

### 6.2.3 Censorship

Internet censorship is defined by Qiu (1999/2000) as ‘a series of defensive policies undertaken by the Chinese authorities to prevent China’s domestic cyberspace from being merged with foreign cyberspaces and keep apart the apolitical and political domains of CMC’ (p.3). Internet censorship has been studied by a number of scholars and widely blamed as the shackles of online free speech in China (eg. Qiu, 1999/2000; Boas & Kalathil, 2001; Harwit & Clark, 2001; Tsui L., 2001; Walton, 2001; Kalathil, 2003; Gorman, 2005; Crandall, et al., 2007; Dann & Haddow, 2007; MacKinnon, 2007; 2009) (see also Chapter 1, 1.3 & Chapter 2, 2.5). The study contributes to a better understanding of Internet censorship in China from a group of common users’ perspectives. Differences have been found in censorship’s influence on political information consumption, deliberation, and participation. The participants believed that Internet censorship was one of the factors that constrained them from generating, retweeting and discussing political content online, but not the major one (see Table 90 & Tables 62 to 65). Meanwhile, censorship was not perceived by the participants as the immediate reason that affects their online consumption of political content (see Table 90) or online political participation (see Tables 48 to 50).

Some scholars (eg. Morozov, 2011; King, Pan & Roberts, 2013; 2014; Cockain, 2014, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014) (see Chapter 4, 4.3.2) show that the government censors are much more professional and clever than other scholars speculate they are, and that censorship influences the Internet users to a greater extent than they realise. King, Pan and Roberts (2013; 2014) have made extensive and constant effort to better understand the party-state’s intent in its censorship in China. They first ‘locate, download, and analyse the content of millions of social media posts originating from nearly 1,400 different social media services all over China’ and ‘compare the substantive content of posts censored to those not censored over time in each of 85 topic areas’ (p.326). They then support their hypothesis with a large-scale experiment, randomly submitting different texts to numerous social media sites and observing what is and is not censored, as well as conducting interviews with confidential sources. Their study finds that ‘the purpose of the censorship program is not to suppress criticism of the state or the Communist Party’, but to ‘reduce the probability of collective action by clipping social ties whenever any collective movements are in evidence or expected’ (King, Pan & Roberts, 2013, p.326), because the party-state ‘believes suppressing social media posts with collective action potential, rather than suppressions of criticism is crucial to maintaining power’ (p.328). The participants’ online exposure to a great variety of criticism directed toward the party-state, its policies and social problems, along with a lack of organisations and activities organised by anyone other than the government on-and-off-line, seems to support their findings.

Evidence suggests that the party-state is aware of the ‘positive’ effect of online expression of negative comments about the party-state, its policies, and its leaders (Morozov, 2011; King, Pan & Roberts, 2013; Bondes & Schucher, 2014, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014). Harsh criticism and outcries of anger and discontent serve as a ‘steam valve’ for the public and thus reduce the possibility of real action of opposition (Bondes & Schucher, 2014, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014). As P02 and P03 believed, the party-state is also learning from online public opinion (see Table 72). King, Pan & Roberts (2013) also believe that the party-state learns from the Internet users’ online criticism, and their views about ‘specific public policies and experiences with the many parts of Chinese government and the performance of public officials’ and learn ‘how to satisfy, and ultimately mollify, the masses’ (p.339). Actually, ‘finding ways to understand and gather information – especially about threats to the regime – is one invariable feature of authoritarian survival’ (Morozov, 2011, p.91). The Internet just provides a new and more convenient way for the government to do so. As such, allowance of online government criticism contributes to the party-state’s adaptability and thus longevity.

How does such censorship influence the participants in particular, and Internet users in general? Cockain (2014, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014) suggests one explanation to interpret the mechanism. He uses Gerbner’s ‘three types of story’ theory to explain how the Internet portrayal of a mean world influences his informants’ feeling of powerlessness. According to Gerbner, there are three types of story. They are ‘one that is about how things work, one that refers to how things are, and one that provides information as to what recipients of the story should do about them’ (p.62). Thanks to the party-state strategic allowance of government criticism, the Chinese Internet is full of the first two types of stories. Contrary to the world in CCTV (China Central Television) news (Liu & Yang, 2014, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014), the world the Chinese Internet portrays is a mean world. The Chinese world is full of dangers of traffic accidents caused by corrupt officials (Wenzhou Train Crash), risks of being killed or injured by offspring of powerful officials (My father is Li Gang), indifference of the public toward other’s suffering (Xiao Yueyue Accident), and so on. However, there is a lack of the third type of story telling the recipients what to do about them (Cockain, 2014, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014). Repeated exposure to such a mean world online without being offered any means to change the situation makes the recipients feel powerless in such a situation, and they become indifferent to the problems, even turning a deaf ear to them, and retreat to entertainment for escape. Such a theory provides an alternative explanation of the participants’ political disengagement and mass entertainment online.

Based on the neodemocracies theory of Dean (2003), the findings of King, Pan and Roberts (2013; 2014), and the speculation of Benney (2014), it is plausible to assume that the participants’ political apathy or cynicism may largely result from the party-state’s censoring and controlling strategy. Dean (2003) criticises the problematic norm of transparency. She challenges the logic that the public will act rationally toward consensus or solutions once the hidden and secret deeds of those in power are made public or transparent. Instead of prompting the public to participate and fight, the availability of ever more information actually depoliticises the public because ‘they are so enthralled by the transparency that they have lost the will to fight’ (p.110). The ‘liberation by facts’ theory (Morozov, 2011, p.59) simply does not work. Therefore, she argues that emphasis on decisive actions aiming at influencing the outcomes instead of transparency is better for democracy.

There is evidence that the party-state today indeed follows the logic that Dean describes – probably even better than she anticipated in her writing. The study of King, Pan and Roberts (2013; 2014) provides evidence that censorship in China allows government criticism, but silences any expression that contains the potential for collective action. Benney (2014) speculates that many Internet companies collaborate with the party-state in the design and development of their products to maximise their profits. Their products encourage users to consume bulk information in a frequent and rapid manner without thinking deeply, which deprives users’ of theor ability for critical thinking and action. The participants’ experience in some way supports Benney’s speculation (see Table 32 and the text following the table, Tables 34 & 82). With effective control of the potential for collective action stimulated by someone other than the party-state both online and offline (see Tables 49, 51 to 53, and Chapter 6, 6.2.6), the recipients of negative information about the government and society, are left isolated and powerless (see Table 81) in such a perceived mean world. They are offered no person or entity other than the party-state to solve the problems. As a result, they develop complex feelings about the party-state. On the one hand, they are discontent with the current system and the problems of the party-state, like corruption (see Table 94). On the other hand, they expect the government (party-state) to be concerned about, and solve, the problems (see Tables 71 & 72). Individuals with a feeling of powerlessness in a perceived mean world are more controllable. They are willing to give up their freedom if they are offered stability in return.

### 6.2.4 Political socialisation and irrelevance

Political socialisation is regarded by many scholars as ‘the most powerful predictor of political participation’ (Gerodimos, 2010, p.23). The study finds a general disbelief in the relevance of social problems to one’s interests among participants. The author argues that such a disbelief is an important factor in explaining participants’ online political disengagement.

The study finds six themes explaining participants’ relative silence on political or social content (see Table 62-65) among which,a lack of motivation is prominent (see Table 63). Lack of motivation also contributes to explaining why P05 did not search for any volunteering opportunities online and thus did not participate in any (see Table 52). Not so explicitly, lack of motivation also affects participants’ online political information consumption. Every participant studied did not have any technical difficulty in climbing over the Great Wall; all participants equally scored 3 in reports of their online skills (see Table 7). So what stopped them from climbing over the Great Wall? The answer is a lack of motivation. Why did the participants lack motivation for freer political information consumption, political deliberation, or political participation? This section begins to explore the question by examining first what motivated participants’ online information consumption of things like news and online communication.

Relevance is found to be a very important criterion that the participants used to select what they read and communicated about online. For example, when P01 described what he read on the university intranet (see Table 44), he said that he read the information relevant to his course, the university, or the university students and he did not read what was irrelevant to him. The information he considered relevant to him included the information he needed for his daily life like the second-hand market and rent information; information that affected his daily life, for example, what schoolmates complained about the university and what happened on campus like unqualified food in a certain university canteen, or an article about the Mayor’s opinion about high Internet fees in universities; and information he needed for his study, consequently his career development, such as information about certificate examination registration, or information about telecommunication networks, what his university was strong at, and so on.

When P02 talked about his news reading habits (see Table 14), he used the word ‘eye-catching’ to describe what types of news he would read. When he was asked to specify what types of news would catch his eye, the first category he identified was news relevant to him, for example about university students. He said, “(I will) read the title. Most news (I choose) is relevant to me or to my identity.” Self-development is the motivation identified when P02 explained why he read the news he chose. P02 stated, “news reading helps me to know the current social situation. For example, the most practical one is how to get a job after graduation. What kind of people does the society need? How should I think about what I will be in the future? What kind of people does the society cultivate? What kind of thoughts do you need to have? Most importantly, (to know) the political direction and tendency of the state, (you should) choose the direction that the state needs most.” To put it straightforwardly, he read the news to find a good job in the future, and to adapt to the society and to the needs of the state.

P02 saw BBS on his university’s intranet as a platform to know about the university before registration (see Table 44). He explained, “complaints on BBS truthfully reflect the bad sides of the university.” He used the university BBS before registration and when he was a fresh student, and stopped using it afterwards. His choice of time to use university BBS shows one of the motivations that a participant has when making decisions about information consumption. A participant is motivated to seek information about things that will affect his or her daily life.

P03 expressed the same concern (see Table 44) and his motivation to seek information and read news can be best described as environment surveillance. He described the motivation to read about “what was happening in the university” as “to be aware of what is going on around” him. He also read information about part-time jobs, house renting, and selling. He visited campus BBS frequently when he was a fresh student and knew little about the new environment he lived in. Seldom did he use campus BBS when he knew the university well, just several times a semester in total. Likewise, P03 stated that his motivation to read news was to “know what happened in the outside world while in the university”.

The participants also reported that they tended to communicate with each other online what was relevant to them. For example, when P02 described what they discussed in QQ groups (see Table 25), most topics, except for funny conversation, can be classified into two groups: information of immediate relevance to their daily life or study and news relevant to university students. The first category includes arranging gatherings, information released by their tutor or representatives, information about study, complaints of bad teachers or courses, sharing of learning experience. Moreover, according to his report, the online news that he had conversations with his roommates about is the news relevant to them. When P03 talked about what was discussed in his QQ groups, three major categories can be identified (see Table 25), and issues of group interests is one.

The study also finds that social utility is a major motivation for the participants’ news consumption and surveillance ranks second (see Table 17). P04 gave three reasons for her news reading which were staying normal, curiosity and course relevance. The first reason she gave for her news reading is “you should have a rough idea of these things. It is abnormal if you do not know when others talk about them.” Therefore, she did not think much about the news, nor did she care about what other people thought about the news. According to her report, she just scanned the headlines on the news website when she logged on to QQ to have a rough idea of what the news was that day and it took her about ten minutes.

The reason P04 gave for being concerned about the issue about Xiao Yueyue was curiosity. She explained, “it was famous and attracted lots of attention. I had already known the Xiaoyueyue Accident. It had already been out there for one or two days. But I had not watched the video and did not know the process. Later I found it on Weibo, just to know what happened and why everybody was talking about it.”

The third reason is course relevance. This is a common understanding and explanation for special interest in certain categories of information. For example, P04 explained her interest in financial and economic news like the stock market with the phrase “probably because I study it”. When she explained why she subscribed to China Daily, a mobile phone English-and-Chinese newspaper, P05 stated three reasons: to broaden her scope of knowledge, to increase her English vocabulary, and to help her with her translation. Two reasons were course-related. P06 also claimed that he read news about Western countries because he was studying English and it helped his study to know more about other aspects of Western culture. Among the twelve participants, P09 was the person who read most about political and social issues. His BA was in media studies and he was doing his MA in law. When P10 explained why they (his classmates and him) only talked about political topics on a very few occasions, the reason was course relevance. He said, “because we, science students, usually talk about other topics. Social science students talk more about those topics.”

To enrich oneself or to broaden one’s knowledge is another important reason reported by the participants. Both Participant 05 and 06 explicitly stated it as one of the reasons for their news reading. P06 explained his long interest in Western news since he was a kid. He said, “they (Western countries) can influence other countries with their ideology. It is an ability which is worthy of our learning and studying.” To learn from them and consequently to improve himself is his motivation.

When they did talk about social issues online, the participants did not seem motivated to contribute to solving the problem. Instead of being concerned with it, the problem serves more as a trigger for them to start a conversation with their classmates or friends. For example, when she talked about her online conversation with her classmates on Weibo about the Wang Lijun Incident and the Xiao Yueyue Ancident, P04 described the incidents as “just topics for chatting” (see Table 68). They just said a few words like “this must be film-making.” “How could it be possible? There have been so many people passing by without helping.” She responded, “I think so. They haven't helped when they obviously saw her.” She said that there was nothing more afterward. The purpose is to network rather than any other reason.

The findings demonstrate that participants were motivated to read or discuss news, ideas or other information when they viewed it as socially useful, affecting their life, study or future development, or a way to watch their environment. The study finds that participants did not see the social or political issues or problems exposed online as affecting their life, work, self-development, interests, or material gains (see Table 87). Instead, the reason or motivation for them to read or talk about social or political issues is moral gain or spiritual satisfaction (see Table 88). For example, P08 summarised one of the Internet’s effects as to raise social conscience. The idea of pursuing virtue or becoming a virtuous person is deeply rooted in the Chinese political culture (see Chapter 2, 2.3.1).

To sum up, each online activity of reading, communicating or participating meets a specific need of the user, to stay normal and consequently be accepted by society, to gain better opportunities in the future by increasing knowledge, to better their performance in their course study, to network, or to satisfy their curiosity. Among the needs, the need to be morally lofty is not of immediate interest to them, therefore, they do not give it serious concern and they do not assign enough time and effort to it. The participants do not think that the social and political issues that emerged in the period of transition have an effect on their life, thus, they do not think that concerning themselves and making efforts for those issues will bring them any tangible benefits.

The Party strategically includes potentially dissidenting leaders and thinkers into the political system so that they benefit too much from it to want to challenge it (see Chapter 2, 2.3.1). Participants of this study are the elites of China (see Chapter 3, 3.5). They are or will most likely be the beneficiaries of the current system. Analysis of socioeconomic features of Internet users in China also supports the conclusion that participants of the study belong to a group of people who have benefited more than any other segment of the Chinese population from the current system (see Chapter 1, 1.3). Social problems like government corruption and social inequality are more likely to benefit them economically than to cause them economic loss. This may partly explain why they did not consider the social and political issues exposed online relevant to them and were not motivated enough to learn more or discuss them or to take some action to change them.

The concept of relevance and its relation to Internet use is a very important one in this project. Zuckerman (2014) remarks in his book *Digital Cosmopolitans*,

‘We’ve built information tools that embody our biases toward events that affect those near and dear to us. Our newspapers and broadcasters pay more attention to local and global matters than to international ones’ (p.28).

Transportation and information tools make connection to the whole world possible and our lives are affected and sometimes dramatically changed by things and happenings around the world. Individualised information tools bring us what we want to know instead of what we need to know. If what we want to know is so closely tied to what we think is relevant to us, it is important to explore how a society constructs and interprets the relevance of things and happenings to us, because that constrains what we see, and thus what we know and how we react.

### 6.2.5 Belief in a shock therapy and low political efficacy

There are two types of theories concerning transition from a socialism model with Chinese characteristics to democracy: a shock therapy and incremental transformation (Goldstein, 1995). The former holds that successful transition requires comprehensive and rapid economic reform and ‘an equally comprehensive dismantling of the institutions of Communist Party rule’ due to ‘the inter-related nature of the economic system’ (pp.1106-1107), while the latter advocates a ‘gradual and incremental transformation of economic and political systems by leaders who use and build upon the existing structures of society’ (p.1105). Participants of this study tended to believe the former. They believed that a ‘comprehensive dismantling of the institutions of Communist Party rule’ was either impossible or would lead to unpredictable results, therefore they did not believe that democratisation was possible in China. The researcher argues that their disbelief in shock therapy results in low external political efficacy, thus online political disengagement.

Most participants except P04 and P12 expressed their belief in the positive influence of the Internet on social issues (see Table 69). However, when speaking of more systematic change like the political system, the culture, the people and their ways of thinking, most participants, except for P09, expressed their disbelief in the Internet’s potential to make such changes (see Table 76). Only P09 believed that the Internet was a power to push political and cultural changes and to promote democracy. At the same time, he expressed a strong concern about the uncertainty of changing speed and outcomes the Internet brought because of its uncontrollable nature. P06 expressed what it meant to change the political system. It was meant “to so-called overthrow and to transfer to Western democracy” (see Table 79). He explicitly expressed and explained his argument that the Internet could only make small and non-substantial changes rather than systematic changes (see Table 76) and small changes would not accumulate into a revolutionary change. P07, P08, P10, P11 and P12 expressed the same belief that there was an extremely small influence of the Internet or no influence at all on the political system (see Tables 76 & 77).

Why did they believe a comprehensive change was impossible? They believed that the Party and state was so powerful and thus a ‘comprehensive dismantling of the institutions of Communist Party rule’ was impossible. P07 believed that the government was unwilling to change and had the power and resources to shape the influence (see Table 77). P08 said, “in China there is no medium which is as powerful as Aljazeera that could expose the dark side of the government and find out the truth. In China, no entity or individual is powerful enough to counterbalance the government.” (see Table 77). They did not believe that the current system was changeable, consequently, they did not believe in their power to change it (see Table 81). Only P01 and P06 expressed their belief in their power to make a difference through the Internet, but they also claimed that their influence was extremely insignificant, equalling to 1 out of 100. Others, except for P09, either did not think about how to make a difference through the Internet, or did not think they could have an influence at all.

Studies have proved that a person’s political efficacy is positively correlated to his/her political participation (see Chapter 2, 2.2.7). Most participants neither believed that the current political system was amendable, nor did they believe that they were able to change it. Why should they participate in politics if they believe that their participation does not help?

### 6.2.6 Lack of civic organisations and activities

There was little, if any, political participation, or any participation at all among the participants (see Tables 48 to 53). And they believed that there was even a lack of volunteering opportunities (see Table 53). Four participants displayed interest or willingness to participate in volunteering activities. Both P01 and P06 made attempts to register with volunteering organisations online or offline. P03 reported that he had read about some public welfare activities online. P05 said, “to be frank, we, university students, all want to do some volunteering work. It is an exercise for us and also helps others”, however, none of them actually participated.

They attribute their non-participation partly to lack of opportunities. P02 blamed a lack of accessible and doable activities for his lack of participation, as he explained, “there are very few activities organised online, or I know a few, because, on the one hand, if there are many, they are held in places far from here. There are relatively few because of Chongqing’s location. There are relatively few activities that we are capable of doing”. P03 reported that he had read about some public benefit activities online, but he could not make it because they were far away. In P05’s opinion, there were not many opportunities, and they were confined to certain groups of people, while they, common students, did not know about them. She tried one volunteering job organised by her college and the experience was not pleasant. She said, “until now there was one that I had a direct experience of. It was volunteering work in a nursing home organised by our college. Volunteers were chosen. I was not chosen. They did not choose me to do it.” Neither P01 nor P06 was approached or assigned any work by the volunteering organisations they registered with.

According to participants’ experience and understanding, there was a lack of such organisations that took an active role in approaching university students and offering them manageable and accessible opportunities. Is their belief a reflection of the reality or an excuse for their disengagement? The author searched online to answer this question and the findings confirmed the participants’ belief. Key word search with ‘volunteer’ and ‘volunteering organisation’ on Baidu, Baidu job search found 1023 vacancies in total among which 30 were located in Chongqing whose resident population was 28,590,000 in 2009[[81]](#footnote-81). There was no opportunity available in Chongqing area in the year of 2012 on the website of China Youth Volunteers, the major volunteer website in China. Civil society has been emerging in China as a result of the economic reform (see Chapter 2, 2.4.1), but is still in its infancy (Brook & Frolic, 1997; Yang, 2003a; Tai, 2006). The findings demonstrate that there is a general lack of civic culture outside the Party online due to the party-state’s tight control of associational activities and collective actions (King, Pan & Roberts, 2013) (see Chapter 6, 6.2.3). It is also evident that the party-state’s strategy to control associational activities and collective actions online is successful to discourage political participation.

## 6.3 The power of disengagement and mass entertainment

### 6.3.1 Introduction

It always has been civic and political engagement that is ‘the focus of scholarly debates on the democratic potential of the Internet and other digital technologies’ (Hsieh & Li, 2014, p.26). A literature review of important research on Internet use in China finds that an optimistic view or a form of digital-utopianism exists in relation to the ways in which the Internet relates to the public sphere (Esarey & Xiao, 2008; Zhou, 2009) in Habermasian terms. Yet a universal public sphere with only rational political debate and participation has never occurred offline or online in any democratic country. In fact, political debate and participation is sometimes rational and calm and sometimes not. The assumption that democracy requires mass rational political debate and participation is the logic that underpins many pessimistic conclusions on the democratising potential of the Internet in China. For example, using survey data, digital ethnography and comparative analysis, Leibold (2011) painted a pessimistic picture of the Sinophone Internet. Digital utopianism comes from some scholars’ focusing on the extremely tiny proportion of political content on the Chinese Internet and ignoring the prevailing expressions of individualism, fragmentation of discussion, infotainment, and entertainment online (Leibold, 2011). Optimistic scholars base their arguments on Internet users’ employing the Internet as a platform for diverse political discussion and civic engagement. They argue that such use of the Internet to cultivate a type of public democracy requires (Yang, 2003b) increasing transparency and thus accountability of the government (Zhu & Bruce, 2010); a shake-up of the power balance between the people and the government (Xiao, 2004); and empowerment of ordinary Internet users to shape and alter the government’s decision-making (Zheng 2007; Yang 2009). As this thesis demonstrates, the Internet is mainly utilised for ‘playful self-expression’; ‘identity exhibition’; entertainment; and networking as well as being a site for ‘shallow infotainment, pernicious misinformation, and interest-based ghettos’ (Leibold, 2011, p.3).

Habermas’ ideal public sphere has long been criticised and he later depicted a public sphere as a highly complex network of various public spheres, which stretch across different levels, rooms, and scales (see Chapter 2, 2.2.4). The ideal Habermasian “public sphere” is problematic in China as it is anywhere in the world. It is always a ‘huge number of isolated public issues’ that made the difference. Pang (2009) suggested that the blogosphere in China and the public sphere of 17th- and 18th-century West were similar in discussing matters of individual concern. Leibold’s research (2011) has suggested that ‘the Chinese-language blogosphere is producing the same sort of shallow infotainment, pernicious misinformation, and interest-based ghettos that it creates elsewhere in the world’ (p.1). Morozov (2011) maintains that the Internet in Russia which is portrayed as ‘an effective and extremely popular vehicle for attacking - if not overthrowing - the government’ is dominated by entertainment and social media as it is in the United States and Western European countries (pp.57-58). In general, media including the Internet, in well-developed democracies, countries in their democratisation, and authoritarian countries, are much more for entertainment than for politics (Morozov, 2011).

This poses the question: do the media play a role in democratisation? If they do, how? The researcher suggests that it might be political disengagement and mass entertainment that possess the democratising power. Taubman (1998) has already proposed the argument at the beginning of Western scholars’ study of the Internet in China. He based his argument on the features of the Internet, the theory of ideational pluralism, and the case of Eastern Europe. He did not provide any empirical evidence when analysing the case of China. His suggestion has not been thoroughly studied afterward. This study provides vivid and detailed empirical evidence to support this argument and to demonstrate how it works.

### 6.3.2 Who communicates to the participants online

The study finds that the Internet was the most important medium for the participants’ information and entertainment. Every participant except P08 (reporting once per two days) reported frequent use of the Internet (see Table 10) and the Internet was the most important mass medium, if not the sole medium, the participants used on campus (see Table 9). The participants rely much more on the Internet than on traditional mass media. Therefore, the researcher argues that participants’ greater exposure to the Internet than to the traditional media breaks the Party and State’s hegemony over the distribution of information and ideologies through which a pro-authoritarianism political culture is cultivated and secured.

How the Internet differs most from traditional mass media in China is in its ownership. All print and broadcast media in China have been exclusively owned by the Party and the State from the very beginning of their operation (Qiu, 1999/2000). As a result, traditional mass media are subject to well-established strict censorship mechanisms such as ‘stratified checks’ to ‘ensure that the publicized political content advocates the party line’ (Qiu, 1999/2000, p.17). Moreover, serving as the ‘mouthpiece’ of the authorities, they are assigned ‘propaganda tasks’ to manipulate and provide media content in favour of the Party’s ideology (Qiu, 1999/2000). Unlike with traditional mass media, the facilities of the Internet are possessed by party-state offices, commercial and non-commercial organisations as well as households and individual users across the world. The Internet is believed to experience less strict control than traditional media in China (Lee, 1990; Zhao, 1998). In addition, the Internet is ‘free from the burden of “propaganda tasks”’ (Qiu, 1999/2000, p.18). To articulate it in an optimistic way, traditional media provide what the Party wants their users to see while the Internet provides what the Party wants their users to see as well as what its users want to see, without challenging the button lines of the Party.

Furthermore, Qiu (1999/2000) suggested that ‘CPC’s portion of the web is trivial’ with few ‘Party ISPs’ and feeble influence (p.18). The findings of the study provide empirical evidence for the feeble influence of the Party on the Internet from the perspective of who communicates to the participants. Among the four sources from which the participants gained news, Chinese government news portals ranks third. The top two are Chinese commercial news portals, and social networking sites or online forums (see Table 14). As to information search, only the university online library which ranks second can be viewed as the party’s ‘mouthpiece’, the others are all owned and operated by commercial Internet Service Providers and some like google, google scholar, and wiki, are operated by foreign ISPs (see Table 18). The Party and State’ influence on social networking websites is even feebler. Of the three social networking websites participants reported using, only P02 reported following a TV programme’s Weibo and there was not any evidence of the Party and State’s influence (see Tables 28, 30 & 33). On university intranets, the information the participants cared about most was what was happening on campus from university staff and students and cause information from the university (see Table 44). As to other Internet services like online travelling (see Table 54), online movies (see Table 55), online forums (see Table 46), online shopping (see Table 95), online music (see Table 97), online games (see Table 98), online lectures (see Table 20), online magazines (see Table 102) and email (see Table 103); the participants did not report any government channels or communicators. Although the Chinese government launched the Government Online Project on 22 January 1999, not a single participant reported consulting government websites (see Table 48).

The point is that the Party and State now has less influence on the participants who tended to choose the Internet as their major medium for information and entertainment. If a democracy needs pro-democracy political culture to take root and grow as discussed in Chapter 2, 2.2.3, an authoritarian regime also needs pro-authoritarianism political culture, or what Taubman (1998) called ‘a tame domestic ideational climate’, to sustain itself. The dominance of antidemocratic and authoritarian political thought has been achieved by rulers’ rigid control of and active promotion through symbolic production institutions for example the education system and mass media (see Chapter 2, 2.3.1). The Internet breaks the Party and State’s hegemony over the distribution of information and ideologies and consequently disturbs the tame ideational climate on which the Party and State’s legitimacy depends. With more exposure to the Internet than to traditional mass media, the participants were distracted from the ideological promotion that the Party and State implements through the traditional mass media. At this stage, it is hard to say if the participants’ usage of the Internet helps them to develop qualities conducive to democracy, but it is sure that their Internet use poses a threat to the cultivation of a pro-authoritarian political culture or a tame ideational climate.

However, this may only look so at the surface. Multiple communicators do not necessarily mean multiple voices, values, ideas or perspectives. Multiple communicators may speak with one voice, and this may be the case in China. For example, Chinese commercial news portals rank first as the participants’ sources of news (see Chapter 4, 4.3.1). They suffer heavy censorship and self-censorship and they are prohibited from direct news-gathering (Xu, 2003). They have no ‘interview rights’ and thus they are ‘news aggregators’ instead of news agencies (Shen & Liang, 2014). They may take advantage of user generated content, information synthesising capacity, and ‘grey areas’ to attract audience, however, they follow the party-state line. Those who do not are blocked or driven out of the market as happened to VOA, google, and google scholar. P03’s understanding of online news demonstrates that such a reinforcement effect is genuine (see Table 16). He showed a general trust in online news. He said, “if I have doubt about what I read on a website, I will check several websites and compare what they say. As to news, actually they are roughly the same, which makes me trust them more.” The picture on social networking sites may be the same. Those who hold ‘undesirable’ views or content are blocked (Ng, 2013) or receive ‘cool treatment’ like the New Left advocates and economists (Zhao, 2008).

Therefore, an increasing number of communicators does not necessarily translate into an increasing plurality of voices, ideas, values, and views. The online world is maybe, as P10 and P12 put it, not different from the offline world. P10 stated his opinion about online content, saying “I think that the websites in China say that the Communist Party is such and such. It is almost the same as I learn from textbooks. I think that there are seldom other opinions. It is almost the same as I am educated unless climbing over the Great Wall or using other channels.” P12 said, “without climbing over the Great Wall, I think, what you view is what is available in China. Therefore, as to the influence on culture, many are controlled. What is published is what is allowed to be published. You can view only such things which are not different from what was there before. Therefore, there will be no significant effect on culture. Although some people like to use cyber language to challenge the traditional culture and some words are rebellious. But (when) there is such a trend, the trend will be killed in its cradle with the control.”

It would be wrong to assume that the anonymity of Internet communication serves only the citizens. While the anonymity gives Internet users in China more freedom to express themselves (actually it is easy for the party-state to track down who said what on the Internet as the majority of Internet users are not skilled enough to avoid it.), it also allows the party-state to ‘guide the public’s opinion’ or to exert its ideological control in a concealed way. It makes propaganda more effective (Morozov, 2011). A good example is the 50 Cent Party composed of an estimated 250,000–300,000 government-hired commentators who post comments favourable to party policies in an attempt to shape and sway public opinion on various Internet message boards (Bristow, 2008; Beach, 2010; Morozov, 2011; King, Pan & Roberts, 2013).

It would require further investigation into the details of the communicators the participants exposed themselves to for an understanding of the fuller picture. Although diversity of the communicators may be increasing, the orientation toward entertainment and lifestyle content is prevalent. It is arguable that the Internet distracts its users from both the ideational influence of the party-state and that of activists (Morozov, 2011).

### 6.3.3 The power of political disengagement and mass entertainment

In addition to distracting them from the Party and State’s influence, participants’ Internet use influences them through another mechanism, that Taubman (1998) called creating conditions of ideational pluralism. Ideational pluralism was defined by (Taubman, 1998) as ‘a situation in which multiple sources of ideas, images, and news are widely accessible to the public’ (p.257). Providing access to multiple sources of ideas, images, and news is one of the prominent features of the Internet. The study finds that through the Internet participants confronted a great variety of information from a great number of communicators among whom the government was hardly represented. Benney (2014, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014) holds the same viewpoint. He maintains that ‘information may now reach the user from a wide-ranging and diverse range of sources, reflecting the views of people from many different places and with many different ideologies’ (p.34). Therefore, the researcher argues that the participants’ exposure to ideational pluralism facilitated by the vast quantity of information and entertainment on the Internet has a positive influence on democratisation in China. And it works in three ways. Firstly, on the Internet, participants were exposed to alternative information and interpretations of canons and/or current events. Secondly, through Internet use, participants knew and understood better different social groups, foreign states, or the outside world in general through various channels and they developed confidence and skills to search for needed information and make their own judgement. Thirdly, Internet use allows for socioeconomic comparisons with life in other countries of different economic systems or political arrangements and life of ‘happier’ or ‘richer’ people; and thus generates discontent with the current system and longing for change.

One way that authoritarian governments often employ to legitimise their rule is providing exclusive interpretations of ‘a certain canon and/or current events’ (Taubman, 1998, p.257). It would be harder to establish challenges to government claims if there were few sources of information and interpretation available outside of those controlled by the ruling leadership (p.257). Eight participants explicitly reported accessing alternative interpretations of canons and/or current events from a diversity of communicators through various channels. The most prominent examples are P06 and P09 who climbed over the Great Wall regularly. P06 reported possessing various sources outside the government control like Facebook (see Table 60), Twitter (see Table 59), Youtube (see Table 11), CNN, ABC, and some Sina Weibo users and Baidu Tieba users who posted resources they gained from outside the blocked Chinese Internet and who provided their own interpretations (see Tables 33, 35, 57, 46 & 85). P09 reported climbing over the Great Wall to access blocked websites for news (see Table 13), political content, and blocked books and movies (see Table 57). He also reads other users’ reflections of historical or current events (see Table 73). He said that he would ‘compare news from different sources’ (see Table 13). P07 was not in the list because she reported that she only climbed over the Great Wall once. But it is important to emphasise that she knew the way to gain access to alternative sources of information. She was capable of using it when she felt needed. The other five participants also had access to alternative information and interpretations, though they did not reported climbing over the Great Wall. For example, a number of Sina Weibo accounts P01 followed provided their comments on hot current affairs and events (see Table 33, Exercise book, Yao Chen, Chen Kun, Han Han, Kaifu Lee, Ren Zhiqiang, and Table 73). P02 reported that he commented on celebrities’ comments on current affairs and also on some famous quotes tweeted or retweeted by stars on Weibo (see Table 36). This means that the celebrities and stars he followed on Weibo did provide comments on current affairs and quotes. He did not only read others’ interpretations, but also provided his interpretation. P03 explicitly said, “if I have doubt about what I read on a website, I will check several websites and compare what they say” (see Table 14). P04 reported that her parents checked *Lianhe Zaobo* online which analysed the reasons when the news about the Wang Lijun Incident was blocked in China (see Table 61). P08 also reported encountering politically sensitive content and comments online (see Table 61) and she would extensively search for information about the incident that interested her and got to understand it (see Table 82). P10 reported that he learned some information that could not be gained from traditional channels from some classmates through the Internet (see Table 72). He believed that people could only speak and act on hearsay in the past when there was no Internet and people gained better understanding then because many people commented on what happened (see Table 73). P05 was not so explicit and she said that she had not searched for information (about Wang Lijun incident) through other channels because she was busy with a topic. But she emphasised that she probably would have searched usually (see Table 16). This means that she usually used more than one channel or source to learn about a political event.

Participants’ accounts provide empirical evidence that the Party and State was no longer the exclusive provider of information and interpretation of what was happening, because the Internet offered them alternatives.

Another easier way for authoritarian governments to rationalise their mobilisation of societal resources, suspension of personal liberties, or initiation of an unpopular policy is to ‘claim evidence of a tangible threat emanating from a demonized domestic group, foreign state, or international organization’ (Taubman, 1998, p.257). A way for them to legitimise the unsatisfying domestic situation is to let their public see worse situations in foreign countries. The two tactics have been skilfully employed by CPC online to legitimise its claim to power (see Chapter 5, 5.2.1). For example, Japan, Indonesia, NATO, Taiwan, and the United States have all been demonised and claimed as threats to China. web-based grassroots nationalism protests against those countries have been organised (Qiu, 2003). For example, when asked if she compared war reports with the current situation in China, P05 said, “I did a little bit. But I have a feeling that we are now in peace when I compare. With comparison, well, (I think that) the Party is very useful. At least we are living a peaceful and safe life” (see Table 82).

However, the Internet makes it more difficult to manipulate understanding of different social groups or foreign states. The study finds that participants knew and understood better different social groups, foreign states, or the outside world in general through various channels and they developed confidence and skills to search for needed information and make their own judgement. For example, P01 compared news on the domestic situation with news on the situation in foreign countries, he said that ‘news on foreign countries showed more the bad sides, probably sometimes beautified reports on domestic situation, and the situation in foreign countries seemed unstable or in bad order’ (see Table 16). P01 reveals a picture of the world painted by the party-state’s propaganda, better called ‘mass persuasion’, system through selective news reporting and information filtering to legitimise its rule (Brady, 2008). The party-state strategically demonises countries like the United States (Brady, 2008) and portrays China as stable and harmonious (see Table 16, P05; Brady, 2008; Liu & Yang, 2014, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014) with ‘positive’ news and ‘no bad news during holiday periods or sensitive dates’ (Brady, 2008, p.96).It portrays some foreign countries as chaotic and unstable in order to engineer consent (Brady, 2008). The strategy works in some ways. Damm (2007) found that Chinese Internet users interviewed tended to describe the democratisation processes in Russia and democracy in Taiwan as chaotic and problematic. The influence of such a strategy is also evident in P05’s understanding of news reporting in China (see Table 16).

However, it is found that such a strategy does not achieve unified results and it is challenged by easy access to different information sources online. P01 said that ‘he did not think foreign countries were as unstable as reports said because news focused on dramatic happenings’ (see Table 16). And he would investigate when making a decision on whether or not work in the reportedly unstable countries. It is evident that P01 believed there was a difference between news on the domestic situation and news of foreign countries and had his own understanding of that difference. Moreover, he did not rely solely on news when decision-making was concerned. Common users’ bicycling blogs provided P01 with knowledge and understanding of places or people he did not know. P01 also got to know and meet two people from a different social group who were older than him and with income, through an online bicycling forum (see Table 46).

Another example is P06, who made friends with different music fans and tour pals through the Internet. They arranged lots of activities like hanging-out, short trips, attending concerts, and visiting each other’s cities together through the Internet. The Internet provides P06 an enjoyable way to know different people and places. For example, he witnessed an anti-Party demonstration in Hong Kong when visiting his couchsurfing friend in Hong Kong and claimed to be inspired by the power of democracy (see Tables 36 & 54). He regularly climbed over the Great Wall to access Twitter for information about incidents of emergency (see Table 59), professional news websites like CNN for details of the incidents (see Table 13), and the Facebook of several close friends who then studied abroad for information about the countries where they stayed (see Table 60). This means it is much harder to lead the opinions of Internet users like P06 and also much easier for P06-like users to doubt and challenge the government’s claims. The Internet does not work alone in exerting such an influence. It interplays with other changes in China like the rapidly increasing number of Chinese overseas students and those who returned to China after their graduation (see Table 2).

The so-called ‘liberation by gadgets’ theory (Morozov, 2011, p.59) can explain another important influence of political disengagement and mass entertainment, the latter in particular. Socioeconomic comparisons with the lives of other people generates dissatisfaction with the current system, since ‘livelihood satisfaction constitutes one of the major sources of regime legitimacy’ (Han, 2012, p.920). How do socioeconomic comparisons work to produce dissatisfaction with the current system? As discussed in Chapter 2, 2.4.1, economic growth has been taken as the cornerstone of party legitimacy since 1978. Moreover, Chinese people’s attitude toward the one-Party state since 1978 has been quite pragmatic and their willingness to support the one-Party regime has been based on the Party’s ability to deliver economic benefits (Han, 2012). With information monopoly, it is possible for the Party and State to declare that the economy grows faster and life is better, safer, and more prosperous in China than in other countries (Taubman, 1998) as the Party and State had done with songs like “*Socialism is Wonderful*”. Loss of the information monopoly makes this impossible. China’s Internet censorship makes a clear distinction between the open area of apolitical arenas and the taboo area of political communication (Qiu, 1999/2000). Beautiful pictures and videos of other places and countries’ sceneries, life, food, commodities and so on are widely available online to boost consumption, especially travelling. Consumption of such information constitutes a considerable part of participant’s online activity (see Tables 33 & 54). The easy access to such apolitical information already poses a notable threat to the Party and State’s justification of its legitimacy.

To make the situation worse, people compare. And their comparison leads to dissatisfaction with their material or political well-being and thus discontent with the current system. In his study of the causes of internal political violence, Lawrence Stone concluded, ‘human satisfaction is related not to existing conditions but to the conditions of a social group against which the individual measures his situation’ (Urry, 1973, p.86, cited in Taubman, 1998, p.258). Social cognitive processes are believed to affect people’s life satisfaction more than objective circumstances (Han, 2012). Several studies have found that ‘positive self-evaluations’ in ‘social comparison with relevant reference groups can elevate the level of satisfaction’ (Han, 2012, p.921). Therefore, it is plausible to assume that negative self-evaluations leads to a decline in the level of satisfaction. Mass entertainment and networking online exposed participants to the lives of famous and rich celebrities, stars, friends, classmates, people of common interest, and people who travelled a lot (see Tables 31, 33, 54 & 60) and plenty of information and images of happy leisure time. This supports Leibold’s (2011) finding of China’s blogosphere as an ‘individualized, ephemeral, and lifestyle-based pool of infotainment’ (p.13). Exposure to others’ happiness, enjoyment, and leisure stimulates participants’ desire for a better, happier, and freer life as P01 said, “I want to go travelling after reading their blogs” (see Table 47).

Comparison across different countries or areas of different economic or political arrangements challenges ‘the prerogatives, policy direction, and even legitimacy of the ruling government’ by providing alternatives (Taubman, 1998). People’s knowledge of alternatives is considered as an important factor for political change (Taubman, 1998). The study finds vivid evidence for such a comparison. For example, when she talked about how watching American TV series like *Desperate Housewives* influenced her, P05 expressed a longing for a better life. She said, “there is certainly a longing for their living environment.… that is to say, when I watch their life, I probably may think that I could live such a life in the future” (see Table 56). P06 was much more explicit with this topic and gave rich details of good examples. He posted a microblog about comparison between children’s welfare in America and that in China when viewing a child beggar. He implied a comparison between Hong Kong people’s political well-beings and that of mainland China by saying, “they (Hong Kong people) have the environment and conditions to express what they really think.”(see Table 36) And also one of his former classmates posted on his/her Facebook a comparison between commodity prices in the UK and those in China (see Table 60). He also read someone’s comparison of income in China and America and concluded that the rising of commodity prices and inflation in China is a bit scary. He believed that the person just ‘stated a fact’ and ‘it was the real situation in America’ (see Table 86). When he talked about his online news reading, he said, “it (The Internet) allows me to see news reports at home and abroad to compare Western and Eastern cultures, or ideologies, or world views, or values so that I know what best suits me and I will choose news that stresses the values I choose... I tend to believe Western values. Firstly it is democracy and freedom” (see Table 82).

P08 also made the comparison when talking about the political influence of the Internet in China. She said, “in China there is no medium which is as powerful as Aljazeera that could expose the dark side of the government and find out the truth. In China, no entity or individual is powerful enough to counterbalance the government.” P10 observed that watching political satires whose content was against the Party and Western culture raised his doubts about the current political system in China and led to his favour of Western democracy. He said, “after viewing, I began to question my old opinions. Before I thought the policies in our country are very good. After viewing those videos, I think that policies in Western countries are better than ours. The doubt arose. By comparison, I think, I have such an idea that we should adopt the Western policies.”

Other participants of the focus group did not explicitly express their preference for Western democracy over the current system. Their attitudes were still apparent when they talked about the influence of the Internet on the current political system. Five participants, all except P09, believed that it was impossible to change while only P09 worried that the result might not be democracy but instability if the changes happened too fast. Their belief and worry indicates that no participants thought that the current system was good enough. No participants questioned why China should be democratised. It indicates that participants all wanted to change and they believed that democracy is a better system. The people who want to change, have been recognised by Lerner and Pevsner (1958), as an important factor promoting modernisation, and by Schramm (1964) as one of the key factors for national development. They believed that mass media promoted people’s need to change by showing them how other people live. Following the logic of Lerner and Pevsner (1958) and Schramm (1964), the researcher argues that people who want democracy are critical to democratisation and the Internet facilitates people’s need to change.

To conclude, P06 believed that the Internet worked in the political changes in Egypt, he said, “take Twitter revolution in Egypt for example. Almost through the Internet, they showed the good side and the democratic aspects of Western countries to people in an undemocratic country and aroused their doubt about their political system and values. And the people were swayed” (see Table 74). Such discontent, longing for a better life, and belief in a better alternative did not result from massive political information consumption, political debates, or political participation, but from little politics and mass entertainment. The Internet might not increase its users’ political knowledge as it fails to do so in democratic countries. However, it ‘stimulates an appetite for the American way of life’, which can pose a genuine threat to the government that is unable to provide it. This is the power of political disengagement and mass entertainment. P09 held the belief that the direction of the influence depended on the majority who knew little and cared for nothing more than their own interests, like the other participants (see Table 84).

,It is important however to note that the seemingly diversified sources of information or ideologies are not so diverse at all. The information and ideas the participants encountered are generated overwhelmingly by people at and above the middle class level, people who should be called the bourgeoisie in China. These people do not represent the majority of people in China. The content they generate reflects a bourgeois ideology, not ‘many different ideologies’ at all in that sense. The participants care more about the bourgeois lifestyle than the political, economic, and social arrangements that make such a lifestyle accessible to the vast majority of a society. Therefore, it may be safer to argue that the participants’ Internet use reflects the winning of the bourgeois ideology over that advocated by the party-state, rather than that the Internet creates an ideationally plural environment for them.

The inclination for the bourgeois ideology and lifestyle is arguably a reflection of the reality rather than a challenge to the party-state. Some scholars (see Chapter 2, 2.4) maintain that the party-state has been taking the liberal and neoliberal path in its field of economy with its political system largely intact since 1978. It does not pose a genuine threat to the regime of the party-state as long as there is not any economic crisis that badly affects the bourgeoisie’s pursuit of such a lifestyle and such content and ideology does not reach or affect the lower class in China. At the same time, it is plausible to argue that China is maybe heading towards a bourgeois democracy. Maybe the situation is best summarised by the metaphor a writer for *The Times of London* used to describe what happened to some of the former communist countries - China maybe will escape ‘the grip of dictators to fall instead under the spell of Louis Vuitton’ (Morozov, 2011, p.68).

At the same time, it is worth noting that the participants came from a specific cohort of the Chinese Internet users. Firstly, it is ungrounded to assume that what they chose to expose themselves to is the full picture of the online world. Secondly, more evidence is needed to argue that their choices of content and values represent those of other Chinese Internet users.

### 6.3.4 Control or liberation: Huxley vs. the gadget theory

Morozov (2011) examines and re-evaluates the media (communication) policies, strategies, and practices the United States employed to ‘liberate’ the authoritarian regimes worldwide including China, Iran, Russia, the former Soviet Union, and so on, and those of those countries to control their population. His analysis offers another way to interpret the political influence of entertainment. He introduces Huxley’s version of political control and the gadget theory to understand the two faces of entertainment. Neither theory can be deemed as right or wrong when used to examine the influence of entertainment, but they reveal different facets of the same problem. This reflects the difficulty of knowing for sure what effect consumption of certain media content may bring.

Aldous Huxley’s (1894-1963) version of political control is one of ‘powerful and yet strikingly different visions of how modern governments would exercise control over their populations’ in the twentieth century (Morozov, 2011, p.75). The other vision is developed by George Orwell (1903-1950) which describes a way of control by ‘pervasive surveillance and mind-numbing propaganda’ (p.76). In *Brave New World* (1932) and *Brave New World Revisited* (1958), Huxley portrays a world in which:

‘science and technology are put to good use to maximize pleasure, minimize the time one spends alone, and provide for a 24/7 cycle of consumption. Not surprisingly, the citizens lose any ability to think critically and become complacent with whatever is imposed on them from above.’ (p.76)

As for mass media like television and the Internet, they provide a great variety of entertainment and pleasure tailored to individuals’ needs cheaply to their audience or users. Media entertainment works as cheap opium which gradually and unnoticeably deprives its audience or users of their ability to think critically and act. Moreover, it produces increasing support for the current regime among its audience and users. According to Morozov (2011), modern authoritarian regimes use both methods of control.

The participants studied demonstrate evident orientation toward entertainment and lifestyle content in both information consumption (see, for example, Tables 33, 54 & 55.) and expression online (see Table 66), and also wide political disengagement. P01 explicitly expressed his news-reading habits as ‘read without deep thoughts and forget when shutting the page’ (see Table 14) and his inability to describe how he felt about what he read (see Table 85). There is not any proof that his news-reading habits and his inability to express himself was a result of his Internet use, but clearly his Internet use did not promote the development of his ability for critical thinking.

Contrary to Huxley who sees media entertainment as a way of control, the gadget theory sees media entertainment as a way to liberate. The gadget theory is one of the two theories that ‘explain exposure to Western media could have democratized the Soviets’ (Morozov, 2011, p.59). The ‘liberation by facts’ theory assumes that Western media liberate the Soviets by showing their citizens the facts about their governments’ misdeeds they did not know before. The gadget theory maintains that Western media ‘made citizens living under authoritarianism dream of change and become more active politically’ by ‘spreading images of prosperity’ and ‘fuelling consumerist angst’ (p.59). How the gadget theory works in China has been elaborated on in the above section, the power of political disengagement and mass entertainment.

The two contradictory theories invoke one question. Is entertainment a method of control or a way to liberate? The answer to this question lies in the answers of another two questions. Does the establishment of liberal democracy need at least most of the population to be equipped with the ability of critical thinking? There are lots of scholars who believe that the ability to rule including critical thinking ability is the gift of democracy, not a precondition for it. If their belief holds water, then there is still a possibility for liberal democracy to emerge in a nation with most of its population unable to think critically. However, there is never a want of theories going against that belief. Democracy without rational participation of its able citizens still favours those who know how to benefit from the system and thus is not true democracy at all (Chapter 2, 2.2.2 & 2.2.6). If the answer to the question is yes, entertainment could be an effective method of control.

Secondly, does entertainment generate strong discontent and longing for a better life that the current system is unable to deliver? If it does and the citizens of a democracy do not need to be capable of critical thinking, entertainment can be a way to liberate. If it does and the citizens of a democracy need to be able of critical thinking, it is highly likely to reproduce another form of, or just another, authoritarian regime. On the contrary, if entertainment satisfies the citizens and the citizens find no reason to shift to a liberal democracy, they will need other reasons for change. Of course, the whole inference is based on the assumption that entertainment disables its audience or users from critical thinking and action. Actually, some entertainment could be enlightening, like travelling. Therefore, it is hard to define whether entertainment is a method of control or a way to liberate. It depends on so many other conditions including the other conditions for democracy (see Chapter 2, 2.2), the capacity of authoritarian regimes to meet the increasing needs of their citizens, the nature of the entertainment the citizens enjoy, the living conditions of the citizens, and so on.

To sum up, the Internet can play a complex and ambiguous role in an authoritarian regime. Like citizens in democratic countries or democratising countries, citizens in authoritarian regimes prefer soft news and entertainment to politics. They long for the lifestyle that democracy enables more than the norms or institutions democracy requires. Nobody gives much thought to what else democracy should mean other than ‘affluence’ (Morozov, 2011, p.67).

‘When the popular Czech cartoonist Rencin draws his vision of what freedom will bring, he draws a man blissing out on a sofa, surrounded by toys and trophies – an outdoor motor, a television set with VCR, a personal computer, a portable bar, an LP grill. There is not a trace of irony in it: this is what freedom means’ (p.67).

That may be the picture many Chinese people draw when asked what democracy means. They are likely to embrace any political form democratic or undemocratic that makes that picture their real life and oppose any that fails to do so. China has been embracing the free market and consumerism since 1978 and it seems to have strengthened rather than undermined its regime (Morozov, 2011).

## 6.4 How do participants understand the influence of Internet use on them?

In rising up, the Iranians said to themselves (and perhaps this is the soul of uprising): “we must change, certainly, the regime….But above all, we must change ourselves. Our way of being, our relation to others, to things, to eternity, to God, etc., all must be completely changed, and there won’t be any real revolution save on the condition of this radical change in our experience.”

Foucault, 1979, cited in Marolt and Herold, 2014, p.13

### 6.4.1 Introduction

This section demonstrates with rich details how the participants understood the influence of Internet use on themselves. It also attempts to examine whether or not their understandings reflect how they are really affected. Finally, it analyses the findings within the theoretical framework of democratisation and political efficacy in order to reveal how different patterns of Internet use affect individuals’ abilities and willingness to fulfil their democratic obligations. Three mechanisms are found which might be politically significant. Firstly, online exposure to a great variety of information from diverse communicators through different Internet applications and user-oriented information consumption equips the participants with the resources and skills to be better-informed citizens. However, it is also found that the variety of information and the diversity of communicators an individual user chooses to expose themselves to online is affected by their English skills, their willingness to encounter conflicting information and ideas, censorship, and the design of the Internet applications they use. Secondly, using online stranger platforms for politics seems to increase users’ internal political efficacy. Finally, viewing, sharing, and deliberation of social issues, exposure to sensitive topics and restricted on-and-off-line sharing and deliberation of sensitive topics, increases the participants external political efficacy, which in turn, encourages their participation online.

### 6.4.2 Why Internet users?

The project concentrates on the understandings and the perspectives of a special segment of Internet users. The future of a technology and its social and political influence is not only shaped by its own architecture, its designer and the social, economic, political and cultural context in which it is embedded, but also by its users and how they use it (see Chapter 1, 1.3). Moreover, the establishment and development of a democratic system needs a pro-democratic culture (see Chapter 2, 2.2.1, 2.2.3, & 2.2.5) and democratic citizens, according to some scholars (see Chapter 2, 2.2.). The research investigates the participants’ understanding of how their Internet use affects their views, attitudes, and behaviours in an attempt to throw light on the question of how different patterns of Internet use contribute to or do not contribute to democratisation in terms of development of pro-democratic culture and cultivation of democratic citizens. It assumes that the Internet is democratising if certain patterns of Internet use promote pro-democratic culture or produce democratic citizens, because they will consciously promote democratic changes in such an environment. The change will be dramatic, nationwide and profound when the Internet is accessed by people from diverse layers of the society. The most important change ‘would come as much from inside the party-state itself as from a youthful digital civic society’ (Lagerkvist, 2010, p.18). The party-state and the society will undoubtedly change, if the people who constitute the party-state and the society change.

The Internet in China is a platform for various groups of players with diverse motives that broadly fall into three categories: governments, nongovernment organisations and individual users; all three groups play an important, though different, role in the development and influence of the Internet. The existing literature, however, pays more attention to the Chinese government while relatively less importance has been attached to nongovernment organisations and individual users. There is no doubt that the Chinese government is important in determining the development and impact of the Internet in China (see Chapter 2, 2.5). Studies on the Chinese government’s performance and influence regarding the Internet, however, can only portray one section of the picture. The other two groups of players should be paid equal attention. This study will focus on another group of players, individual users. Three reasons contribute to the choice of subject for this study.

First, individuals are of great importance in the process of democratisation and for the consolidation and advancement of democracy (see Chapter 2, 2.2.2). The theories of the transitional society (modernisation theory), development communication and the public sphere all attach great importance to the role that individuals play. Lerner and Pevsner (1958) argued that the transition of a society from a traditional one to a modern one happened through the transition of every individual and they found a positive correlation between media participation and literacy and empathy, namely, media participation helped to transfer a traditional individual into a modern one. Schramm (1964) also stressed the importance of people’s attitude to the development of a nation. Both theories emphasise the significant role that individuals play in the transition or development of a society and the positive influence of mass media exposure on personal development. One of the three criteria for the public sphere summarised by Habermas (1989) is the public use of rationality of individuals. Here again the quality of an individual is stressed. Therefore, as democratisation is an evolutionary process, it is plausible to assume that individuals play an important role in this transition.

Moreover, the attributes of communication subjects (the Internet users in this study) have been proved to be equally important in deciding the effect of communication by lots of empirical studies (Guo, 1999, p.208). Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that the effect of Internet use on individual users varies according to their different attributes. Studies from the perspective of its users contribute to a better understanding of how diverse the influence may be and also help to reveal the unintended consequences that the controllers and providers may fail to expect.

Finally, the composition of Internet users in China is a rapidly-changing picture and it always deserves close examination. For example, when MacKinnon (2007) asserted that the Chinese Internet users hardly represented the Chinese population as a whole, she based her conclusion on the description of the Internet users in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ (CASS) 2005 study on urban Chinese Internet use. When Damm (2007) pointed out that the most important group of Internet users in China was the Chinese middle class who had a strong interest in personalised and individual lifestyles and was then much less politicised than it had been in the 1980s, the number of Chinese Internet users was 130 million.

### 6.4.3 The Internet and better-informed citizens

The participants of the study believed that the Internet broadened their channels of information and views, increased their amount and range of knowledge and information, and made them better-informed (see Table 82). The participants reported that the Internet did not only provide the participants with range of information with more choices of sources faster and more conveniently, it also changed the way they consumed information (see Chapter 5, 5.5.2). They considered user-oriented attributes as an advantage of the Internet compared with the traditional media. When using the traditional media, users follow the path that the medium sets and it is difficult to gather together the information on a certain topic that interests a user. On the Internet, a user can theoretically reach all the information online through applications such as search engines, super links, social networking applications, news websites, and so on at a time when he/she needs it. Therefore, instead of being a passive receiver, participants have the ability to positively and purposely seek the information they need and make their own judgements. P08 reported that she would extensively search information about the incident that interested her and get to understand it. P09 would compare information from different sources, and P10 relied on different reports from other people online for information about what happened.

Did their Internet use really make them better informed as they believed? Some previous studies (Kalathil, 2003; Yang, 2003; Shen, et al., 2009; Xiao, 2011) support their beliefs. Moreover, findings of the research also provide some evidence (see Table 82). The study found that the Internet exposed the participants to an extensive range of information from numerous communicators through various channels, through which it had broadened and changed the participants’ views of reality (see also Chapter 6, 6.3.2). The Internet provides a platform for individual users to exchange information and opinions much more freely and conveniently. Therefore, there was a tendency for the participants to depend more on other Internet users for information and opinions. It, on the one hand, magnifies the voices of the public. On the other hand, it increases the participants’ sources of information and exposes them to different and conflicting ideas which were rarely, if ever, present by the traditional propaganda apparatus. The participants reported that they depended on common users of specialised online forums and communities, and social networking websites for a greater variety of information, ranging from study, comments on news, job hunting, future career, what was going on around them, travelling and shopping to music, poems, movies, and so on. As Internet users themselves, they also contributed to content generation online by sharing electronic resources, uploading their presentation PPTs, making comments or submitting their writing for online publication. Not only is the Internet a network of networks which provides ever-accelerated updating of information, it also serves as a platform for an ever-growing number of applications. It has been found that every participant utilised a number of channels, including news portals, social networking, specialised online forums and communities, search engines, instant messaging, university online libraries, online data bases, online sharing, and online shopping, for different information and different purposes (see Table 12).

However, some scholars (Morozov, 2011; King, Pan & Roberts, 2013; 2014; Benney; 2014; Cockain, 2014, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014; Zuckerman, 2014) suggest that such a belief is an illusion due to both the party-state’s censorship strategy and the confirmation bias as a result of the self-gatekeeping mechanism (see Chapter 4, 4.3.2 & 4.4.3; Chapter 6, 6.2.3). The participants’ news reading habits reveal that their sources of news are far from being as diverse as the Internet allows although most of them use more than one source (see Table 13). Their main sources of news are the leading commercial news portals in China which are controlled and hardly contradict each other (see Table 16, P03). Their news reading is interest-oriented, path-dependent, or superficial so as to have just a rough idea of what happened (see Table 14), and so is their information search habit (see Table 19). The number of microblogging accounts they followed is big (see Table 32), but the diversity of the accounts is in question (see Table 33) and their choice of who to follow was pre-set by their interests and shaped by what the service recommended (see Table 34). Their patterns of news reading, and information search and consumption demonstrate that the Internet was used by them to create an ‘echo chamber of their own design’ (Sunstein, 2009) rather than to better inform them with diverse sources and conflicting views. Meanwhile, what is available and what they can find online is greatly affected by censorship (see Chapter 5, 5.5; Chapter 6, 6.2.3).

There is evidence that the participants were better informed in one way or another by the Internet than by the traditional media in China (see Table 82). However, the research suggests that the potential of the Internet to better inform the participants is far from being fully recognised. Realisation of its full potential is constrained by the participants’ English skills (see Table 13), their self-gatekeeping mechanism to create an echo chamber for themselves, and the party-state’s censorship. Moreover, even if individual users are better informed of social and political issues with the Internet, more political knowledge and information does not necessarily translate into action, but contributes to further legitimise the party-state’s rule due to its strategy to selectively filter and produce online content (Brady, 2008) (see also Chapter 6, 6.2.3).

### 6.4.4 Strangers and internal political efficacy

A positive correlation between political deliberation on a stranger or public platform and internal political efficacy has been found (see Tables 42 & 81). Those participants who spread, generated, or conversed about political content on a stranger or public platform (see Tables 36 & 37) tended to have higher belief in their influence through the Internet than those who did so only on an acquaintance platform, or with acquaintances, or those who engaged in no political deliberation online at all (see Table 81). Internal political efficacy concerns personal beliefs regarding the ability to achieve desired results in the political domain through personal engagement and an efficient use of one’s own capacities and resources (see Chapter 2, 2.2.7). P01 and P06 engaged in online political deliberation on a stranger or public platform and they had a higher internal political efficacy than the rest of the participants. Although their internal political efficacy was low, it is better than none, which is what the rest of the participants possessed. P01 claimed that the effect of his sharing was extremely small, as he said, “I can only show my concern (about the issues), but cannot influence the decision making of the government”, he uttered his belief in his ability to influence society through the Internet (see Table 81). He explained, “I want to let others know by sharing in order to make them angry and make comments. I do not want to make comments because I lack words to express myself well. My support and sharing of the posts can help to raise concerns about the issues. My support and sharing of the posts has effects.” Like P01, P06 believed in his ability to influence others through the Internet and made intentional moves to cast his influence. He said, “there are things that I want to make my effort to change… but to make my contribution, to express my demands and also let my followers know my demands in a hope to make a difference.” He had a clear conscience about how he exerted his influence - through his followers - which demonstrates his belief that he was capable of influencing his followers. Also like Participant 01, he claimed that his influence was small. When he was asked to score the degree of his influence through the Internet, he said, “probably 1 out of 100. There must be some effect.”

Except for P01 and P06, the other nine participants did not claim that they had any sense of self effect (see Table 81). P09 is a special case and will be discussed in the latter part of the section. The nine participants were classified into two categories. The first category constituted the larger group including P03, P04, P05, P07, P11 and P12 who had not shared or generated any political content online at all. The second category included P02, P08 and P10 who sometimes or occasionally shared, generated, or conversed about political content, but the communication was restricted to friends, classmates, or a small number of mixed followers (see Table 66).

P09 was different from the rest of the participants. He read news online every day from different resources (see Table 13) and he even climbed over the Great Wall to access blocked political content (see Table 47). He never retweeted or produced any political content on any public platform online. His conversation on politics was restricted to a special group of people. His statements imply that he believed that there would be some effect if he shared what he had read online or made any comment, but what effect it would bring was uncontrollable. He explained why he did not post political content online on public platforms. There are two reasons. Firstly, people read and retweet, but they do not analyse what they read and retweet. He said that he analysed what he read. He did not know whether or not those who read what he shared would do the analysis. He was not sure how many people would read what he shared and share it with others without any analysing. Therefore, he did not share them. Secondly, people attack those who make comments online. He said, “there is a problem. Once you speak, others will attack you. Finally you are labelled either as a Dailu Party or a 50 Cent Party. You must be one of them. Finally people consciously or unconsciously choose to be silent.”

### 6.4.5 Belief in ‘We’ effect and external political efficacy

The relationship between political participation and political efficacy has been repeatedly investigated by empirical research, a wealth of literature produced, and correlation found (Almond and Verba, 1963; Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba, et al., 1978; [Pollock, 1983](#_ENREF_13); [Finkel, 1985](#_ENREF_3); [Kenski and Stroud, 2006](#_ENREF_11); [Caprara, et al., 2009](#_ENREF_1)). However, while our empirical evidence of the causal relationship between political participation and political efficacy is vast, our qualitative exploration of how they work to exert influence upon each other is clearly deficient, if not absent. The study probed into the question through the focus group and in-depth interviews and generated rich qualitative data to better understand the mechanism. The study finds a belief in ‘we’ effect that helps to explain how external political efficacy works to facilitate political expression. It is a belief that it will help to solve the problem in some way that we may not know, and if we together show our concern about the problem by viewing or sharing.

All participants held a strong belief that online public concern would help to solve the problems and improve the accountability of the government (see Table 72). As P01 put it, the influence of his online viewing and sharing was extremely small, if there was any. But the problem would be more likely to be better solved if it attracted wide attention from the public. Other participants expressed the same belief in similar words. For example, P11 said that the government would not risk going against public opinion, if there was consensus among a wide public. Although the participants did not believe that they as separate individuals could have a say in the government’s decision-making process, the public gathered together by the Internet could. Their belief in the positive influence of the online public is labelled as the ‘we’ effect.

In most research, external political efficacy is measured by the participants’ degree of agreement with four statements: “in our unit and/or village people like me have no say”; “leaders in our unit and/or village don’t care about what people like me think”; “people like me have no say in government decision making”; and “my connections are not as good as others’ so it’s hard for me to succeed” (Ferris, et al., 2005). Therefore, discovery of the ‘we’ effect indicates that Internet use enhanced the participants’ external political efficacy. Furthermore, the participants also exhibited increased interest and participation in online civic engagement like concerning themselves with civic news, sharing information and opinions about social issues, and so on, as a result of enhanced external political efficacy.

Their belief is supported by the fact that the Internet did watch over the government and did promote the solution to social problems, for example, the earthquake in Wenchuan on May 12 2008 and the SUN Zhigang case (Yang, 2003). The participants also gave a number of examples (see Table 72). Encouraged by the effect of their previous experience, all participants tended to pay attention to social problems and issues, which was evident by a general interest in civic news among them (see Table 15), and share them through various Internet applications like instant messaging and different social networking websites (see Tables 28 & 37). All participants have reported that they followed, searched for, and shared the big social issues like the Xiaoyueyue Accident and numerous small issues. Sometimes the participants engaged in discussions and posted long comments. For example, P02, a second year male undergraduate in electronic engineering and automation, shared information about the Xiaoyueyue Accident through QQ, Renren, and Sina micro-blog, and asked the public to say ‘no’ to apathy and to help others unselfishly.

The ‘we’ effect commonly observed among the participants explains, in one way, how external political efficacy and online political information consumption and deliberation work to influence each other.

### 6.4.6 Summary

Drawing from the democracy theory on the important role that people play in a democracy, the section focuses on the mechanism by which Internet use works to impact on its users’ ability and willingness to perform their political rights as well as obligations and their political performance. It has been found that the participants believed that Internet use had an impact on the participants’ views, attitudes, and behaviour (see Tables 82 to 84). The participants believed that they were better-informed because the Internet broadened their channels of information and views, and increased their amount and range of knowledge and information. However, it is also evident that the Internet’s full potential to inform its users is far from being realised. It has also been found that political deliberation on online stranger or public platforms has a positive relation with one’s internal political efficacy. The ‘we’ effect, a belief that it will help to solve the problem in some way that we may not know, if we together show our attention to the problem by viewing or sharing, was observed.

Moreover, participants also believed that their Internet use had an effect on their behaviours (see Table 84). They either believed that there was an accumulating and unconscious influence on their behaviours or their thinking, but they could not name it; or identified several ways in which their Internet usage affected their behaviours. Those skills they believed developed through their use of the Internet are all important for a person to be a qualified citizen of a democracy (see Chapter 2, 2.2.7).

## 6.5 Climbing over the Great Wall: liberalised Internet, liberalised China?

Providing people with tools to circumvent censorship will be nearly as effective as giving someone with no appreciation of modern art a one-year pass to a museum. In 99 percent of cases, it’s not going to work.

Morozov, 2011, p.81

### 6.5.1 Introduction

There is a common belief or assumption that a liberalised Internet will bring liberal democracy to China. Censorship and the party-state’s control of the Internet are widely blamed as the shackle that chains the democratising power of the Internet. It is assumed that citizens in China will inevitably turn to political content unavailable under control like ‘reports documenting human rights abuses’ by their government and ‘rebel against repressive rule’ once they break through the barrier erected by the party-state. Previous studies (Guo, 2007; Morozov, 2011) and the findings of the participants’ experience and understanding of their climbing over the Great Wall prove that assumption wrong. The researcher, therefore, argues that the Internet is just a medium that goes between the reality and the people and it mirrors or amplifies what is there in the reality. The Internet together with other driving forces in the reality will determine the direction of the political system in China. It is never the Internet alone which is the deciding factor. Censorship and the Chinese government’s control of the Internet is just one of the constraints, not even the most important one.

The researcher’s argument is supported by the findings about participants’ experience and understanding of their climbing over the Great Wall. Using a number of tools, Internet users in China can access the liberalised Internet that citizens in democratic countries enjoy. Guo’s (2007) survey of Internet usage in seven cities in China demonstrated that 61.4% Internet users had never climbed over the Great Wall; 21% seldom climbed over; and only 5.5% always climbed over. Although their surveys found that the percentage of Internet users who had never climbed over the Great Wall dropped from 71.2% in 2005 to 61.4% in 2007, the proportion that always use (including sometimes, often and frequently) also decreased from 9% to 5.5% (different measurement scales might partly contribute to the difference). What stops them from stepping into the liberalised online world, especially for those who know how to climb over but seldom try? What do they do in the liberalised online world after climbing over? The findings of the project provide some new fragments and fresh perspectives on those questions. The project answers three questions: Is climbing over the Great Wall a technical matter or a matter of interest or motivation? Will climbing over the Great Wall change the user’s perspective about the political system? Will climbing over the Great Wall make the user more politically active?

### 6.5.2 Lack of motivation: an obstacle to a liberalised Internet

To the first question, it is a matter of interest or motivation instead of a technical matter for the participants studied. The fact that a first year undergraduate in English, a first year master in law and all his roommates could climb over the Great Wall proves that it does not require sophisticated techniques that a university student cannot acquire or cannot overcome with the help of others if they are motivated to do so. Moreover, all participants were equally capable in terms of Internet skills according to their reports (see Table 7). The fact that a third year master in computer science climbed over once to access a blocked website, turned it down without knowing the name of the website, and never climbed over again raises the question of what the logic behind her action is.

P07 described her sole experience of climbing over the Great Wall. She stated, “I climbed over (the Great Wall) once. It was a website recommended by a friend of mine. I viewed once. I do not remember what the website is because I viewed only once. I had a look by climbing over the Great wall. The comments on some events are shocking. Their views are completely different from and contradict what we learned from domestic websites. I was shocked at the moment and shut it down without further reading” (see Table 91). Why was P07 not even curious to gain further knowledge of the website or the content while she had a clear idea that there were messages and opinions completely different from what she had learned before? It is unclear and beyond the scope of the project to explore why P07 shut down the website and never climbed over again. It is unclear what suffocated her curiosity or why her curiosity was not invoked. However, one conclusion can be drawn that there must be other reasons rather than the government’s technical control of the Internet that stop Internet users from enjoying the liberalised Internet.

The project provides one possible explanation. Although university students are discontent with some political and social problems such as corruption, social inequality, misconduct of the government, and so on, they do not think that those problems affect their lives (see Chapter 7, 7.1.4) and they are generally satisfied with the current situation or their current lives. For example, when P03 explained why he had never used the mayor online mailbox, he said, “I think that Chongqing is good” (see Table 48). P05 also expressed explicitly the same idea. She said, “in general, the over-all situation in China, I think, can be described as harmonious. To us, to live in such a situation is not bad, as well and good. Well (something) cannot be changed. Anyway, in whichever country, USA or other countries, there must be some conflicts. There are some conflicts in China. That is Tibet” (see Table 16). The Internet for them is utilised as a tool for leisure, entertainment, networking, and information for life, environment and study, not a tool to achieve political goals, or to speak of democracy. The controlled Internet meets all their needs, thus, it is not necessary for them, or to be accurate, they have never thought about such a need to circumvent ‘the Great Wall’ to reach the liberalised online world that the few activists at home and abroad advocate they should enjoy. Moreover, P05’s account evidences the influence of the party-state ‘mass persuasion’ strategy to ‘demonize the United States’ (Brady, 2008, p.98), to refrain from ‘promoting the views of the enemy’ (p.99), and to selectively report international news.

According to the understanding of P06, three types of people tend to climb over the Great Wall: democracy lovers, film watchers and fans, and teachers and professionals. He said, “climbing over the Great Wall is common among people I know. Those I know are usually democracy lovers. I feel that they are crazy about democracy. There are also students like us who climb over the Great Wall to watch films, follow stars, and read politics. I do the three. There are teachers and professionals who climb over to collect academic resources. But among the peers around me, there hardly is anybody who I know is a climber.” Common university students do not belong to any of the three groups.

The picture is not that most participants demanded democracy or knowledge about democracy, but were held back by the government control. In fact, most participants were definitely not democracy lovers. If they were, they were capable of finding ways to circumvent the Wall and access the liberalised world they desire. In fact, neither did they know more than what they were allowed to know about democracy, nor were they interested or motivated to learn more. For example, P11 explicitly stated her disinterest in climbing over the Great Wall. When P09 and P07 described their experience of climbing over the Great Wall, P11 tried to change the topic by saying, “having heard what they said, I think that I am not interested in the topic of climbing over the Great Wall.” They were aware that the Internet was censored and they only knew what they were allowed to know without climbing over the Great Wall (see Table 77). They, however, did not make any attempt to know more due to both the party-state’s successful propaganda and mass persuasion strategies and their unwillingness to leave their comfort zone with very little challenging, conflicting or contradicting information.

### 6.5.3 Liberalised Internet, same perspective

Will climbing over the Great Wall change the user’s perspective about the political system? The answer is “no”. Participants, not just the Internet users, knew enough about the negative side of the current political system like corruption, abuse of public power, inequality, and so on from direct experience, second-hand experience, and various mass media, among which the Internet is just one. Moreover, they also know that people’s lives in Western countries are not like what is taught in the textbooks, from movies, sit-coms and TV programmes that are widely available in China. The doubt about the current system and the idea of an alternative system can result from exposure to information from within the ‘Wall’. For example, P10 had never climbed over the Great Wall. He described how he was influenced by watching political satires online (see Table 84).

It has also been found that the tendency to value Western values more than the Chinese ones could be a consequence of factors other than climbing over the Great Wall. For example, P06 claimed that his favour of Western countries had started since he was a kid when the researcher does not assume that he climbed over the Great Wall. Accessing the blocked Internet by climbing over the Great Wall did not expose him to something unexpected, but reinforced the ideas he had long held. P09 explicitly expressed the idea. He said, “usually viewing blocked content does not change my original conclusions, only when I neglect some important aspects. Because I think that I view information from foreign countries about an issue just to see if there are other opinions from other perspectives” (see Table 58).

In addition, when climbing over the Great Wall people might turn a deaf ear to what they choose not to hear for various reasons as P07 did. Therefore, the researcher argues that climbing over the Great Wall to access a liberalised online world does not necessarily change people’s opinions about their political system.

### 6.5.4 Liberalised Internet, more active political engagement?

Will climbing over the Great Wall make the user more politically active? The answer is another “no”. Climbing over the Great Wall does not necessarily make the user more politically active. Here, politically active refers to taking action online with an intention to achieve desired results in the political domain. According to the definition, only two participants among the twelve, P01 and P06 were politically active.

If a one-time experience of climbing over the Great Wall counts, there were three participants who have climbed over the Great Wall. P07 did not claim any effect on her regarding her one-time climbing over the Great Wall experience. The only effect the researcher can assume is that she then at least knew there existed opinions about certain issues completely different from or contradicting what she had learned. However, she also claimed, “my friend also said that I should not believe that much certain content written outside China. So I did not read further and did not care much about it.” P09 behaved rather reservedly online on public and stranger platforms. It is unclear whether or not his reserved behaviour was the result of his regular climbing over the Great Wall. It is clear, however, that climbing over the Great Wall did not make him politically active.

P06 climbed over the Great Wall regularly and he was politically active. It cannot be claimed, however, that it is climbing over the Great Wall or climbing over the Great Wall alone that makes him politically active, because P09, another regular climber, and P07, a one-time climber, were not politically active. Nor can it be claimed that climbing over the Great Wall makes the user more active than those who do not climb over, because P01 who had never climbed over the Great Wall was more politically active than P09 and P07.

In conclusion, the findings disprove the assumption that a liberalised Internet will automatically or necessarily bring democracy. The findings demonstrate that on a liberalised Internet a user does not necessarily acquire knowledge or information that substantially changes his/her views about a political system. It is also found that climbing over the Great Wall does not necessarily make a user more politically active than one who stays within a controlled Internet. Though it has not been explored in this project, it is proved that there must be other reasons rather than censorship and the government control that stop people from using the Internet as a tool for political purposes.

However, it is important to note that living in an environment with a controlled Internet and accessing the unfettered Internet by climbing over the Great Wall is different from living in an environment with an unfettered Internet. There are a considerable number of ideas, issues and events that the users within the Great Wall have not any idea or knowledge about due to the censorship. It would be impossible for them to search for something whose existence is unknown to them. In addition, the users’ knowledge about the world and ways of thinking have already been skewed by the controlled Internet before reaching the unfettered Internet. It will take time for them to indulge in such a liberalised environment to be noticeably influenced. P07 accessed a blocked websites only once. Seldom did P06 climb due to the inconvenience of climbing over the Great Wall (see Table 59). Foreign websites accessed by climbing over the Great Wall is only one of P09’s five news sources and the other four are all located within the Great Wall. Therefore, more evidence is needed to support a conclusion about the liberalising influence of an unfettered Internet.

## 6.6 Beyond the Internet and beyond politics: civic talk and civil society?

### 6.6.1 Introduction

The findings resonate with existing studies on the influence of online public opinion on solving social problems and checking government misconduct, especially the local government. Most participants claimed that they believed in the positive effect the Internet had (see Table 79). The study explored and will present what has been less studied, how the Internet casts its influence in ways beyond the Internet and in the domains beyond politics.

### 6.6.2 Civic talk beyond the Internet

The study has found that censorship and government control did not prevent the participants from reading and seeking political content, even the sensitive content, but it affected their online political deliberation because they knew that they were watched and they were afraid of being caught. A question arises. Did the participants communicate political content after reading online? Yes, they did (see Tables 67 & 68). The study finds that civic talk went within and beyond the Internet. Hsieh and Li (2014) suggested the same phenomenon that those who did not discuss politics in public could still engage in politics through civic talk. The democratic potential of civic talk has been well-established. Hsieh & Li (2014) found a positive association between online civic talk and online political participation in the context of Taiwan. A few other studies (e.g. Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004; Shah, et al., 2005; Best & Krueger, 2006) also observed that practicing civic talk was positively related to engagement in civic and political activities.

### 6.6.3 The rise of online civil society

In the first section of the literature review, the author defined civil society and analysed how it promotes democracy (see Chapter 2, 2.2.4) to provide a theoretical framework to analyse participants’ associative activities online. The three levels of associative activity proposed by Young (1999) are adopted, i.e., private association, civic association and political association. According to Young (1999), private association is ‘activity for the participants or members of the association’ (p.145). Examples of private association include families, social clubs, private parties and gatherings. On the other hand, civic associations refer to ‘activities with a civic purpose [which] aim to serve not only members, but also the wider community’ (Young, 1999, p.146). Associations and activities such as some crime-watch groups or the United Way[[82]](#footnote-82) are considered as civic associations. Political association consists of ‘any activity whose aim is to politicize social or economic life, to raise questions about how society should be organized and what actions should be taken to address problem or do justice’ (Young, 1999, p.148), for example, political parties, lobbying organisations, and special-interest associations.

The Internet and civil society in China interact in ways that shape the development of both. The Internet facilitates civil society activities by offering new possibilities for citizen participation while civil society facilitates the development of the Internet by providing the necessary social basis – citizens and citizen groups – for communication and interaction (Yang, 2002, p.303).

Participation in activities, associations or organisations with objectives in the political domain is found to be rare among the participants (see Table 51), while involvement in QQ groups and online forums and communities is found to be common among the participants (see Tables 24 to 27, 46 & 47). Although there were not any explicitly stated political objectives, the researcher argues that the flourishing of online groups, forums and communities marks the rise of civil society on the Internet in mainland China.

Every participant joined a number of QQ groups and the number of groups varied from less than ten to nearly thirty (see Table 24). The application QQ group allows common QQ users to establish QQ groups each of which has the capacity to host up to 500 members. It provides interfaces for group discussion, sharing of multi-media materials, group space, and group live discussion in audio or video forms. It also allows members to communicate with each other personally. Thanks to its nature of group communication, QQ group has great power of networking and organising. Usually it is just chatting, funny conversation, sharing of meaningless information, and caring about each other going on in the groups. The seemingly meaningless communication has a function to keep the network alive and members involved. Moreover, they also discuss issues of group interests (see Table 25). Another function of QQ groups is organising. The results show that all participants, except P04 who lived at home with her parents, reported that their QQ groups functioned as a platform to arrange group activities (see Table 25).

The networking and organising capacity of the Internet is great even among strangers. Online forums and communities and QQ groups bring together strangers with the same interests regardless of distance. P06 is a good case. He has actively employed different channels of the Internet to make friends online and offline and to travel (see Tables 21, 24, 33 & 54). His friends made online can be categorised into two groups: travel friends and music fans. Travel friends are more like one-time personal relationships. They are usually first known from online communities that provide communication space for people of the same interests. And then further relationships are developed through offline group activities or through QQ contact, a personal communication channel. For example, 58 City Community is such an online community (see Table 54) where there are division communities for more than 320 cities in China. The community provides categorised information in each city and also space for communication for people of different interests. Users can communicate and arrange activities in the space provided. P06 participated several times in long distance trips and hanging out together arranged by his hometown community. There are also specialised travelling websites or communities where users can make couchsurfing friends to travel in an economical way. Before deciding to go to each other’s city, they try to know each other further though QQ communication.

Compared with travel friends, music fan friends are more long-lasting and organisational. They are first known from specialised fan websites created by fans of a special singer on Baidu Tieba. And then further communication and organisation moves on to the QQ groups users choose to join. P06 joined the local QQ group of Chongqing where his hometown and his university are based. As P06 reported, through sharing information and joining arranged activities together, he felt the group was like a family (see Table 25). Music fan friends mix with travel friends. For example, seven of the P06’s couchsurfing friends came from Baidu Tieba for music fans. They shared an interest in music and posted in the same Tieba. They first met at Mariah Carey’s concert and then exchange QQ contacts.

The case of P06 demonstrates that the Internet has great potential to bring people of the same interest together across space and has great potential to organise activities. More importantly, the potential has been turned into reality. Members of such online communities develop group identities, learn from each other about different places and cultures, and make possible offline opportunities that would not be possible without the Internet.

In addition to networking and organising, QQ groups have the power to mobilise and to influence. Members of a group gain a sense of support from the group and are more likely to take action. The case of the teaching quality group discussion reported by P03 demonstrates how a QQ group can mobilise its members and influence reality (see Table 25). P03 reported that his current university class discussed bad teachers or courses in their QQ group. There was a teacher whose lectures were incomprehensible for most of the students, which resulted in averagely poorer performance of their class in examination compared with other classes of the course. They discussed it in their group, reported the problem to their tutor, and also had direct communication with the teacher. Although they did not achieve the result they desired, improved teaching quality, the group discussion turned their complaining into action. They did not publicise the problem on a more public platform, the university BBS, which might have a bigger influence, because they considered that it would have bad effects on the teacher. The influencing power of the Internet is also evident in online local communities, professional communities, and professional QQ groups and object-centred QQ groups like online game QQ groups and music software QQ groups.

University BBS is one of the online local communities that a great proportion of university students use. University students use their campus BBS as a window to see what is going on around them and to know the university they study in from the students who they can trust as reliable sources of information. University BBS is also used as a platform for students to publicise and discuss the problems in the university. For example, P01 reported that he would write something if he knows about it on University BBS (see Table 45). And P03 believed that deliberation on campus BBS influenced the discussion-making process in a university.

Online professional communities and QQ groups have the potential to influence professional ethics, protocols, norms and so on. They constitute what Habermas (1989) called the occupational sphere. For example, P07 reported that she and her classmates used specialised websites and forums to search for and learn information in their fields, and also to upload codes they wrote. Users of the websites or forums are common registered users like them (see Table 46). Such an exchange of information on the frontier technology in the fields certainly has impact on the development of new norms, protocols and ethics in the fields. Such online communities can achieve a ‘shared repertoire of rules, practice and standards’ in their fields though long-time shared practice and negotiation (Liu & Seta, 2014, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014).

Another important source of influence is a product of market competition. To attract and develop loyal customers, traders of electronic products like mobile phones, music software, computer games etc. create online communities and QQ groups to provide customers with information, service and space for communication and also to learn about their customers. For example, P02 reported his use of a specialised forum to seek information about digital products, to seek answers or solutions to the questions or problems with his digital products (see Table 46). He also voted for the post whose message was helpful. P03 mentioned a music software QQ group created by the people who manage the software (see Table 24). In that group, members shared opinions about the software, provided information and mutual help with the software, mobile phones or music searching, and music recommendations. In addition, P03 has followed the official Weibo of Q Pet Game. He shared information released by the account. As a channel to bridge the developers and the customers, such online functions certainly affect the development and production of the products.

Another important effect is peer production enabled by the Internet. Benkler (2006) believes that peer production, as a nonproprietary model of production, frees production of knowledge, information and culture from the influence of market and government forces. As a result, it ‘creates the opportunities for greater autonomous action, a more critical culture, a more discursively engaged and better informed republic, and perhaps a more equitable global community’ (pp.102-3). For example, P05 shared self-generated study materials on Baidu in a hope that others might find it useful. She participated in knowledge production online that has potential to influence others. Baibu provides a platform for users to share their knowledge and information. Users can both upload what they have and download what others share. The platform forms a loosely tied community of peer production. Users are quite autonomous in their action. Peer production provides an alternative to production of knowledge, information and culture driven by market or governmental forces, and thus opportunities of the birth of alternative knowledge, world views, values, and cultures. Such peer production communities include topic oriented forums P02 participated and professional-based communities P07 joined (see Tables 46 & 47).

Participants not only participated in those groups. They also actively used Internet applications to establish groups to serve their own purposes. For example, P02 reported that he found his hometown fellows in the university which he studied in through a schoolmate website, created a QQ group and then added them in. His purpose was to help the fresh students, get help from the junior or senior students and facilitate communication (see Table 27). P01 also reported that he joined groups established by classmates or schoolmates.

To sum up, associations at civic or political level are found uncommon among the studied participants while associations at private level extremely common. A number of Internet applications like online forums, communities, QQ groups and so on, are utilised to bring together people who share an interest. In online communities, forums, or groups, common users communicate, exchange information, and arrange activities for the benefit of their members, which cast an influence on the real world. Moreover, Internet users also use the Internet to organise activities and groups to serve their own purposes. Their participation in and organisation of associations and activities provides their opportunities to practice ‘skills of democratic citizens’ (Diamond, 1994). Moreover, the activity of creating and joining online communities to serve individual’s purposes and those of the communities is also found among other cohorts of Chinese Internet users, eg. the Chinese Educated Youth (Yang, 2003a), the county’s emigrants (Pang, 2014, cited in Marolt & Herold, 2014). The author argues that this trend of Internet use marks a rise of civil society online.

# Chapter 7: Conclusions

## 7.1 Introduction

Mainland China has been undergoing dramatic changes in its economic, political, and societal domains since 1978, which show inklings of democratisation. The Internet has witnessed a significant development in the last two decades in mainland China and played an important role in the process of democratisation. This project has sought to unpick the mechanisms of how the Internet exerts its impact on its users and society through the lens of its users as outlined in Chapter 1. The findings of the research reveal a multifaceted picture. This concluding chapter summarises the overall findings, highlights the contributions, identifies the scope and limitations of the research, and looks into various possibilities for further research.

The second section of this chapter seeks to summarise and reflect on the key themes extrapolated from the research findings and bring them together in a cohesive argument. It moves on to further interpret the political implications of the research findings in the context provided in Chapter 2. The third section highlights the two major contributions of the research: the use of a grounded theory approach in the study of Internet use in mainland China and how multiple methods and NVivo were utilised to gather and analyse data; and the shift of focus from the government to the common users. The penultimate section takes a more reflective approach. It identifies some of the limitations and draws the boundary of the research. Finally, the last section explores various possibilities for further research based on the findings, reflections and discussions in the previous sections of this chapter.

## 7.2 Reflective summaries

The project has found the phenomenon of political disengagement online very common among all the participants. According to the data, online political engagement accounts for only a very small proportion of all participants’ online activities. It was found to be common for the participants to consume political and social information online regularly, but consumption of political information was brief and minor compared with consumption of other information or other online activities. All the participants retweeted political information, but not frequently. Usually most participants did not produce original political content like comments or tweets online. Participation in political activities or organisations was rare among all the participants. The phenomenon of political disengagement found in this research accords with findings of previous research ([Dahlgren, 2005](#_ENREF_1); Guo, et al., 2007).

Guo, et al. (2007) argued that the Internet in China serves as an entertainment highway and a platform for interpersonal communication rather than being an information highway. Their surveys found that ‘the most fully used function of the Internet was still its entertainment function’ including games, listening to music, watching movies and TV etc. ( Guo, et al., 2007, p.36-38). They also found that reading news online was popular, but it was characterised by infotainment. Social and political issues did not enjoy as much popularity as ‘softer’ issues. Previous research reveals that the trend of political disengagement is not a unique phenomenon in China. In Western countries, the Internet was much less used for political purposes than for other purposes like entertainment, and non-political networking and chat (Dahlgren, 2005).

Key findings of this thesis point to a number of factors that explain why the use of the Internet for political purposes is minor. Censorship is widely blamed as the shackle on Internet freedom in mainland China. Its influence was found evident in this research. Censorship, however, was not found to be one of the major reasons. The research reveals that censorship had a direct impact on the participants’ generating, retweeting and discussing political content online. It was not the immediate reason that affected the participants’ choice of online consumption of political content and online political participation. However, censorship influences the participants to an extent greater than they realised through making ‘unwanted’ content unavailable such as politically sensitive content, social media posts with collective action potential, and information about what individuals should do about the problems exposed.

One of the major reasons for political disengagement that the research uncovered is related to the perception that politics seemed irrelevant to the participants. The participants did not perceive or consider that the social problems or issues they were exposed to online affected their life or development. The participants reported surveillance, social utility like networking and moral concerns rather than seeking a better natural and social environment for themselves or seeking to protect their own rights and interests as the major motivations for their consumption of political or social news online.

A revolutionary view of democratisation is another important theme that emerged from this research. The study found that the participants tended to see democratisation as a revolutionary overturn from the current system to a democratic government instead of an evolutionary process during which small changes accumulated to long-term substantial transition. Due to their revolutionary view of democratisation, they were inclined to believe that democratisation was impossible in China and thus they believed that their participation did not help. It is argued, therefore, that a revolutionary view of democratisation partly contributes to political disengagement online.

Studies of political efficacy (Caprara, et al., 2009) assert that individuals tend to be more active in both conventional and non-conventional forms of political participation when they believe that political action of its members, individually or collectively, does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process or the political system. It can be assumed that the opposite is also true. Low political efficacy hinders both conventional and non-conventional forms of political participation. Political efficacy constitutes two parts: internal political efficacy and external political efficacy. The author argues that individuals’ external political efficacy has an immediate impact on their internal political efficacy according to the findings of this research. Low external political efficacy results in low internal political efficacy. The research found low external political efficacy, low internal political efficacy, and little use of the Internet for political purpose to be common among the participants. The research also provides rich data to better understand the relationship between the three phenomena. The participants’ belief that the current political system is not subject to substantial political change led to their sense of their relative powerlessness in helping bring about a more democratic system. The participants neither believed that the Internet could democratise China, nor did they believe in their power to make a difference through Internet activity and discussion.

Results of this research also support the conclusion found in previous studies (Caprara, et al., 2009) that there is a positive correlation between individuals’ internal political efficacy and their political participation. More importantly, this research helps to better understand what contributes to low external political efficacy. It discovers a factor that explains why individuals believe that a political system is unamenable to change. It is argued that individuals are more likely to believe that a political system is unamenable to change when they take a revolutionary view of political change. As a result, individuals are less active in political participation. Figure 6 demonstrates how a revolutionary view of democratisation works to exert its influence upon an individual’s use of the Internet for political purposes.

*Figure 6. How does a revolutionary view of democratisation exert its influence?*

A revolutionary view of democratisation

Low external political efficacy

Low internal political efficacy

Political disengagement

The fourth theme emerged from this research to explain the phenomenon of political disengagement online, is the relative lack of an organisational culture outside the party. Five out of six participants expressed a desire to participate, in one way or another, in volunteering activities or other community organisations. However, they actually participated in none. They reported that they were willing to do some volunteering work but they believed that there were few organised opportunities to do so. The lack of organisations and activities actively approaching university students and providing channels or ways that were easily accessible by the students to involve themselves in political participation was seen to be a major factor affecting their willingness to engage. As a result, only P06 reported participation in online petitions and none of the other participants reported any political participation online or offline. Their belief in lack of participation opportunities is confirmed by the author’s online search. Existing studies suggest that a lack of an organisational culture outside the party online results from the party-state’s strategic control of the Internet.

Based on the literature review of previous studies of the Internet’s influence in China and findings of the study, the author argues against a logic underlying many previous studies which emphasise the communicative and deliberative power of the Internet. The logic of such literature is that Internet technology necessarily promotes greater democratic deliberation because of the nature of the connected network and increasing democratic deliberation promotes democratisation. However, even in democratic societies, the Habermassian model of rational political discourse, either online or offline is far from being realised. The author argues that it is apparent political disengagement and ‘infotainment’ that actually highlight the democratising potential of the Internet in China. This study provides vivid and detailed empirical evidence to support this argument and to demonstrate how it works. The study finds that the Internet was the most important medium for the participants’ ability to access information and entertainment. The participants rely much more on the Internet than on traditional mass media. The participants’ greater exposure to the Internet than to the traditional media possesses the potential to break the Party and State’s hegemony over the distribution of information and ideologies through which a pro-authoritarian political culture is cultivated and secured.

In addition to the potential to distract the participants from the Party and State’s influence, the participants’ Internet use influences them through another mechanism, what Taubman (1998) called creating conditions of ideational pluralism. Providing access to multiple sources of ideas, images, and news is one of the prominent features of the Internet. The study finds that through the Internet participants confronted a great variety of information from a great number of communicators among whom the government was hardly one. Therefore, the author argues that participants’ exposure to ideational pluralism facilitated by the vast quantity of information and entertainment on the Internet has a positive influence on democratisation in China.

This works in three ways. Firstly, on the Internet, participants were exposed to alternative information and interpretations of canons and/or current events. Secondly, through Internet use, participants knew and understood better different social groups, foreign states, or the outside world in general through various channels and they developed confidence and skills to search for needed information and make their own judgement. Thirdly, Internet use allows for socioeconomic comparisons with life in other countries of different economic systems or political arrangements and life of ‘happier’ or ‘richer’ people; and thus generates discontent with the current system and longing for change. However, the research cannot conclude whether online entertainment and political disengagement will be a way to liberate or a way to control. The answer to that question is determined by many factors other than the Internet.

It can be asserted that the participants believed that their Internet usage had a positive effect on their views, attitudes and behaviours. Evidence for this assertion can be summarised as follows. Firstly it was believed by the participants that they became better-informed citizens through online exposure to a great variety of information from diverse communicators through different Internet applications and user-oriented information consumption. However, the findings of the participants’ news reading and information search and consumption habits demonstrate that the Internet’s potential to better the participants is far from being realised. It is constrained by the participants’ self-gatekeeping mechanism to create an echo chamber of their own design and by the party-state censorship strategy. Secondly, viewing, sharing, and deliberation of social issues, exposure to sensitive topics and restricted on-and-off-line sharing and deliberation of sensitive topics, increases the participants external political efficacy, which in turn, encourages their political deliberation online. The author, therefore, argues that the Internet to some extent has been able to promote a form of democratisation in mainland China by cultivating better-informed and more politically active citizens.

The findings about the participants’ experience and understanding of climbing over the Great Wall challenges the belief that a liberalised Internet will bring liberal democracy to mainland China. Internet users in mainland China can access the ‘liberalised’ Internet that citizens in democratic countries enjoy through climbing over the Great Wall. However, only about 5.5 % of Internet users in seven cities of China climb over the Great Wall. What stops them from stepping into the ‘liberalised’ online world? It has been found that climbing over the Great Wall was a matter of interest or motivation instead of a technical matter for university students. Most participants were found to be content with what the controlled Internet provided and possessed neither the motivation nor interest to circumvent the ‘Great Wall’ to access the ‘more liberalised’ world online. Moreover, those who went beyond the ‘Great Wall’ were found to believe that they learned enough about the political system from the controlled Internet and information about and from the ‘outside’ world usually did not change their perspective. Nor did the research find that climbing over the Great Wall made the user more politically active. Their belief that the controlled Internet adequately satisfies their needs and informs them sufficiently about the political system is arguably one of factors that contribute to the lack of motivation to access the liberalised Internet. Therefore, the author argues that there is no ground to assume that a ‘liberalised’ Internet will democratise mainland China or that a controlled Internet will stop mainland China from democratising.

In addition to the influence of Internet use on its users, the research also discovered how the Internet has been making changes in the transition process in mainland China in domains within and beyond politics. The findings resonate with existing studies on the influence of online public opinion on solving social problems and checking government misconduct, especially that of the local government.

The Internet is a medium for both mass and interpersonal communication. The study finds that diffusion and effect of online content follows the two-step or multi-step model and goes beyond the Internet through offline interpersonal communication. Participants reported that they first read a certain piece of political news online on public platforms such as news portals, forums and so on. And then they discussed the news with their friends, classmates, or special groups of people through interpersonal communication channels online like QQ contact. The diffusion and the effect of the news go through two steps from mass communication to interpersonal communication. When receiving a piece of news from a public platform or interpersonal channel online, some participants reported posting it onto a stranger platform with comments. Their posts and comments might attract interaction, further retweeting, or both, and then a multi-step diffusion begins. For some participants, the online diffusion stops at receiving the news, especially when the content is politically sensitive, but the diffusion moved on to offline interpersonal communication. For many university students, this happens in the dormitory where they use the Internet in the presence of peers: roommates and classmates. For others, this may happen at home with family members or other places with colleagues or friends.

Despite censorship and government control, the reflective accounts of the participants paint a picture in which some are communicating political, sometimes politically sensitive content online through various channels, mass or interpersonal; while some dare not to do so, but discuss and disseminate through offline interpersonal channels which they consider safe. Therefore, it is argued that the influence of the Internet goes beyond the Internet. Especially with the growing popularity of mobile phones connecting to the Internet, such interpersonal communication can happen anytime anywhere with various groups of people.

To better understand its influence on democratisation, the Internet’s influence beyond politics cannot be neglected. Participation in activities, associations or organisations with objectives in the political domain is found to be rare among the participants, while involvement in QQ groups and online forums and communities without explicitly stated political objectives is found to be common among the participants. It has been found that a number of Internet applications like online forums, communities, QQ groups and so on, are utilised to bring together people who share an interest. It is in this space that common users communicate, exchange information, and arrange activities, which cast an influence on the real world. Moreover, participants also reported having used the Internet to organise activities and groups to serve their own purposes. Yang (2002) argued that the Internet facilitated civil society activities by offering new possibilities for citizen participation. The author, therefore, argues that the flourishing of online groups, forums and communities, or private associations, marks a rise of a more democratically spirited civil society on the Internet in mainland China.

## 7.3 Scope and limitations of the research

The first limitation of the research is bound up with the nature of qualitative research. As a piece of qualitative research, it concentrates on the depth, not the breadth, of the research topic. It is thus beyond the scope of the research to explore how popular the discovered phenomena are among the population due to the small sample size. The research stops at finding the existence of certain new themes or categories among the participants. Moreover, the small sample size and the sampling methods of grounded theory also do not allow the researcher to estimate how representative the samples are of the population.

The second limitation of the research is a result of its data collecting methods. The in-depth interview and the focus group were used as the major techniques to collect data. The study bases its analysis and conclusions on the self-reports of the participants. When drawing conclusions, the author must be cautious not to assume that what the participants reported is what they really did and thought, but what they tried to construct with the researcher and the group members. They reported and emphasised what they thought interesting, important, significant or worth sharing with the researcher or other group members. For example, the use of email was not mentioned by most participants. Actually only two participants mentioned the use of email without any detail. The fact is that email was ranked ninth in the top ten most popular Internet applications among Chinese users, according to CNNIC’s *The 30th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*.

The research takes a grounded theory approach. The interviews and the focus group were led by the participants instead of by the researcher or any pre-assumed questions. Such an approach generated rich and original data. In total forty-one categories are clearly defined with 3,408 references generated. However, the data collected are not evenly distributed under each category which emerged from the coding or among the participants. The participants tended to talk much more about some topics (eg. QQ in Chapter 4, 4.4.1; Weibo in Chapter 4, 4.4.3; & Belief in the Internet’s effect) than some other topics (eg. Online lecture in Chapter 4, 4.3.3; & government corruption in Chapter 5, 5.6). Not every participant contributed to each topic evenly. As a result, some categories are supported by more data and contribute more to understanding the studied topic while other topics might need further research.

Moreover, the research topic involves some politically sensitive content and private content that some participants might not have wanted to share with the interviewer or the group members. For example, when P07 talked about her sole experience of climbing over the Great Wall, she mentioned that she had viewed a blocked webpage and had been shocked by the information, which was completely different from what she had learned without climbing over the Great Wall. However, she insisted that she could not recall what the webpage and the content was. P10 reported that he had watched political satire online. He said that the content was somewhat against the Party or somewhat coloured by Western culture without actually saying what the content was when asked about it. P12 also reported that his roommate and he sometimes viewed politically sensitive content on Renren (a Chinese counterpart of Facebook), but he did not say anything about the content they viewed.

Finally the research concentrates on the Internet use of the participants and it is beyond the scope of the research to explore other factors about the participants’ lives, including their use of other media. Since other factors have not been studied, the research should be cautious of attributing the participants’ understandings to the influence of Internet use.

## 7.4 Contributions of the research

As indicated by Qiu (2003), in the area of Internet studies, ‘the case of China is invaluable’ (p.1). In an effort to better understand this invaluable case, the research attempts to make two contributions to Internet use studies in China. Most importantly of all, the major contribution of the research lies in its methodology. In-depth interviews, a focus group, search and analysis of web content, and auto-ethnography were utilised to collect qualitative data that provided rich details about individuals’ Internet use and their understandings. Moreover, the research took a grounded theory approach to analyse the data and to generate new understandings and ideas that would provide imaginative explanations of the topic studied instead of applying the existing conceptions formulated in the context of democratic countries. The methodology shifts the focus from the government and the technology itself, to the users, in order to add to the picture the perspectives of individuals. Earlier studies concerning the influence of Internet use tend to overlook the diversity of Internet usage and the intentions of individual users. There had been two major approaches to studying Internet use. The first one takes Internet use as a whole. As Shah, et al. (2001) pointed out in their study, ‘studies on the psychological and sociological consequences of Internet use have tended to view the Internet as an amorphous whole, neglecting the fact that individuals make very different uses of this emerging medium’ (p.142). When examining Internet use more widely, the simplest way to measure Internet use is via a model that expresses the haves and the have nots – the digital divide - which simply distinguishes those who have Internet access from those who do not. For example, Dutta-Bergman (2005) examined the correlation between social capital and access, individually and at community level, to the Internet. Katz and Aspden (1997) conducted a national survey to investigate empirically the relationship between Internet use and social participation in terms of religion, leisure and community. In their study respondents were divided into five groups, namely, non-users not aware of the Internet, non-users aware of the Internet, former users, recent current users (those who started using the Internet in 1995) and long-time current users (those who started using the Internet prior to 1995) according to their own reports.

Another way to measure Internet use is by recorded hours online. This method was employed when Kraut, et al. (1998) tried to establish a causal direction of the relationship between Internet use and social involvement and psychological well-being in their longitudinal study. Nie and Erbring (2000) also oversimplified the Internet and its users, overlooking different Internet experiences and types of users. Those studies partially revealed some aspects of Internet use.

Dutta-Bergman (2005) asserted that ‘different media use patterns serve different functions for the individual consumer’. Individual users tend to use the Internet differently. The result of the June 1995 survey containing 997 online users conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press revealed that there were typically four basic types of users: the researchers who spent much time online doing research for work or school and research-related communication; the home consumers typically using the Internet for practical tasks like finding out information about travel, stock quotes and so on; the political expressives; and the party-animals going online for games and entertainment information (Norris and Jones, 1998). Shah, et al. (2001) broke down Internet use into four components – social recreation, product consumption, financial management, and information exchange – and indicated that ‘unlike overall Internet use, specific types of Internet usage have significant and systematic links with the production of social capital’. They pointed out that ‘informational uses of the Internet are positively associated with the production of social capital, while social capital is depleted by entertainment uses of the Internet’. Dutta-Bergman (2005) found that community participation (β= .25, p<.001) and community satisfaction (β= .04, p<.01) were positively correlated with community-based Internet use.

The results contradict the arguments made by Putnam (1995) and Nie and Erbring (2000). Their arguments are based on the much researched displacement theory (Finhoult and Sproull, 1990; James, et al., 1995; Robinson, et al., 1997), which suggests that different communicative channels compete for the limited amount of time an individual has and the time spent on one channel increases at the cost of time spent on another. It is problematic to use the displacement theory to interpret the relationship between Internet use and offline activities. In the first place, the single measure model fails to capture the diversity of Internet use. Some online and offline activities overlap with each other, which gives rise to questions such as whether online community participation is community participation. In addition, it presumes that the studied channels compete against each other for the limited amount of time. Actually an individual’s time is consumed by various activities. An increasing amount of time spent on one, thus, does not necessarily lead to a decrease of all other activities, but one, or some. Therefore, the author argues that patterns of Internet use are stronger predictors of civic and political engagement than hours of Internet use. It is then advisable for scholars to differentiate Internet use when examining its political impact on individual users.

Findings of the study support this argument. Different participants utilised a number of different Internet applications. For example, only P05 reported usage of online lecture and P06 usage of Twitter, Facebook, and Baidu Tieba. Moreover, the same Internet application is found to be employed by different participants in quite different ways. For example, for P03, Sina Weibo was only used as a platform to receive messages from an online game service, while for P01 and P06, it was an important source of information and a channel to make a difference. It is also evident that different patterns of Internet use bring different consequences. P06’s usage of Twitter and Facebook opened a window for him to see daily life in foreign countries and led to social comparison and discontent with the current system. Usage of microblogging to make a difference is found to be positively related to one’s internal political efficacy and thus encourages political participation.

Another approach is to study the use of a specific Internet function or service such as blogs or online forums. For example, MacKinnon (2007) studied the use of blogs and the government’s censorship in China. She concluded that the government’s control over the Internet has largely been successful in preventing a democracy infestation; especially in the short term, however, blogs and other forms of online citizens’ media served to quietly deepen the space of civil discourse. This approach is inappropriate when the study focuses on patterns of Internet use which have political implications in general. An individual may use a blog to express his or her concerns or opinions about social issues. He or she may use a blog simply for fun or to achieve commercial goals. In addition, this approach is too narrow to capture the full picture of an individual’s Internet use that might have political implications. An individual who uses a blog to obtain political or social information and express political ideas is highly likely to do the same through other channels that the Internet offers, such as search engines, news websites and online forums. Hsieh and Li (2014) find that using multiple media online for communication is positively associated with online political participation. It would be wrong to attribute the effect of the Internet on an individual to a specific function.

Such an approach cannot discover how a participant utilises a number of Internet applications to achieve one goal, as found in this research. For example, P06 used online forums to get to know strangers with common interests, Weibo and QQ to further develop his relationship with strangers into friendship, and offline activities organised using a different Internet application to turn online friends into offline friends. In addition, such an approach cannot find out how a message travels though the different Internet platforms a participant uses. This research saw how a piece of politically sensitive information might be received from a pubic platform like a forum, and then discussed with close friends through interpersonal channels online like QQ, or with roommates or family members offline.

From this perspective, it is not difficult to understand why the results of the studies on the political influence of Internet use contradict each other and why a number of studies failed to see the transforming potential of the Internet in China. Taking Internet use or the use of a specific function like blogging or the online forum as a whole is misleading. In fact, the Internet in China is mostly used as a tool for entertainment (Guo, et al., 2005; CNNIC, 2010). The situation is the same in democratic countries. The use of the Internet for political purposes, as Dahlgren ([2005](#_ENREF_1)) argued, was clearly minor compared with other purposes to which it was put (p.151). He also concluded that democratic deliberation was ‘completely overshadowed by consumerism, entertainment, non-political networking and chat, and so forth’ ([Dahlgren, 2005](#_ENREF_1), p.151).

Therefore, the author argues that one is unlikely to find a significant political impact of Internet use or the use of a specific function of the Internet in general on an individual or a society. However, it is arguable that certain patterns of Internet use do possess the potential to exert influence in terms of politics, culture and society, especially in the process of democratisation. The qualitative data collected from six in-depth interviews, one focus group, search and analysis of web content, and the author’s digital ethnography provide rich details of how the Internet was used by each individual and how each individual understood their usage. More importantly, with a holistic view of Internet use through an individual’s lens, the research offers a chance to discover the mechanism by which different Internet applications are employed strategically or unconsciously by an individual to achieve their desired results and how individuals differ from each other in terms of that mechanism.

Another limitation of the existing literature is that concepts formulated and deeply embedded in the context of democratic countries are employed as the theoretical framework for a large proportion of the studies. A grounded theory approach allows the author to see through the lens of actual users instead of scholars and to establish concepts and theories using the words the participants use. As a result, this thesis provides an original contribution to our understanding of how Chinese university students view the Internet in relation to politics. These findings include how university students disengage from political activities due to both practical reasons such as a lack of opportunity, a lack of interest or ideological concerns such as a revolutionary view of democratisation. It contributes to understand the democratising potential of some online activities earlier studies failed to see. It has been found that seemingly trivial online exchanges may nevertheless contribute to a changing social and political environment – albeit in ways that the participants may not themselves describe as ‘democratising’. For example, the thesis throws light on of the role of apparent political disengagement and online entertainment. Previous studies overwhelmingly portray online entertainment as harmful or erosive to democracy. For example, several studies (e.g. Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Shah, et al., 2005; Wang, 2007; Thussu, 2007) suggested a negative relationship between recreational web use and civic and political activities (Hsieh and Li, 2014). However, democratic potential of online entertainment in authoritarian countries, especially those in transition like China, has been underdeveloped. The thesis provides rich and vivid empirical data to understand how online entertainment like movie-watching created conditions of ideational pluralism and thus potential to challenge the tame ideational climate. A grounded theory approach generates rich and primary interview data from which those findings are derived.

More recent work (eg. Marolt & Herold, 2011; 2014) starts to put more emphasis on the connections between the online and offline worlds, the Internet users, the nuance of the diverse online world and that of individual’s Internet use and understandings. This research joins the endeavours to understand the less-studied field of how Internet users use the Internet and how they perceive and articulate their use. The major contribution of the research is its initiation of a methodology in the area of the political influence of the Internet in China. The grounded theory it employs provides a new approach and fresh views from which to study the invaluable case of China, which differs in many ways from its democratic counterparts. Moreover, the research concentrates on a less-studied factor of the landscape, the individual users. The shift of viewpoint adds a new perspective from which to view the picture and to better understand the situation. As a result, it produces a number of original findings that will be of interest to the broader community of scholars researching China’s Internet in particular and scholars who study the influence of ICTs on the emergence and consolidation of democracy in general.

## 7.5 Further research

Using a grounded theory approach, this research is an innovative study which seeks to understand the political significance and democratising potential of the Internet in mainland China through the lens of the user. Both the methodology and the findings of the research raise many interesting questions that deserve further research. In terms of methodology, further research can be developed in three areas. First of all, one of the objectives of the research is to generate new ideas or understandings that provide explanations of how the Internet is influencing mainland China in its process of democratisation from the perspective of participants. However, generalisation is not possible due to the nature of qualitative research. To explore the breadth of the findings and to test the findings among the population and various groups of Internet users, further research can be conducted to more precisely define the themes emerging from this study.

Secondly, the research used in-depth interviews and a focus group to generate data. Both methods rely on the participants’ self-reports. Web data has been collected, but not systematically. To further develop this new methodology in this field of inquiry, attempts can be made to systematically employ other methods of data collection like observation and collecting web data for triangulation. This will add to the picture what Internet users are actually doing online, what content they are exposed to, and what they share and generate. Thirdly, as an initiative effort to understand the political influence of the Internet from the perspective of the Internet users, the research examines Internet use among university students who are a very special group of people in mainland China as elaborated on in Chapter 3. The methods and methodology developed in this research can be used to study other groups of Internet users. Furthermore, the grounded theory approach developed in this research and instruments to measure newly-emerging concepts could be used in cross-national studies.

As to the findings of the research, firstly, there are a number of new themes which emerged during data analysis, but could not be clearly defined. Table 4 demonstrates all the themes emerging from the axial coding among which only some could be clearly defined and contributed to the discussion and the findings. However, several of the others are very interesting and deserve further research. For example, online shopping was found to be very popular among the participants. However, this research cannot provide interpretation of the political meanings of their online shopping. P10 made a very interesting point that the Chinese government as a whole, or as a collection of individual Internet users, also learns more about the outside world through the Internet. His view echoes that of Marolt who perceives the Chinese state as many different individuals, groupings, institutions etc. (Marolt & Herold, 2014). The political influence of the Internet on government officials as individual users has seldom been studied. It would make a valuable study to explore how the changes have been made possible or impossible from inside the system.

Another example is watching films from Western countries online. P05 talked at length about the potential impact of watching American films. She said, “I want to say that the impact is potential. I cannot tell, but I think that there is an impact on values.” She gave an example of how an American mother reacted to her crying baby and said, “I will pay attention to that when I educate my baby in the future. Impact like this. It is just an example.” Again, this theme has not been further investigated in this research. Secondly, there are themes that are clearly defined but result in more questions. For example, why do the participants lack motivation for using the Internet for political purposes? This, in turn, raises several other interesting questions. Why did the participants think social issues exposed online were irrelevant to them? Is it due to how the social issues presented or constructed online, or is it because of their social status? Are they actually affected by those social issues? The study suggested one explanation, but it is far from sufficient.

Concepts like belief in a shock therapy, lack of opportunities for civic engagement, tolerance etc. and the case of P06 and P09 also deserve further attention and research. The participants believed that a comprehensive overturn of the current system to a democratic government was desirable but impossible. It would be interesting to explore in what way the participants think a comprehensive overturn is achieved; what they think a democratic government is; what they think the current polity is; what they think the defects of the current system are; and why they think so. Participants expressed common willingness to participate in civic activities or organisations and attributed their lack of real participation to a lack of opportunity. What is the real situation? Is there a real shortage of civic activities or organisations in China or is it that the participants lacked real motivation and therefore overlooked the opportunities? What reasons lie behind the real situation? Participants reported exposure to many more communicators, extreme comments, opinions coloured by subjectivity, and opinions that they did not agree with online, but only P09 explicitly linked exposure to conflicting ideas and perspectives online to increased toleration of ideas and people different from himself. P09 differed from the other participants in his course, grade, and climbing over the Great Wall mainly for politics, especially politically sensitive topics, blocked books and movies. What Internet use patterns contribute to increasing tolerance? As to political socialisation, why did participants think social problems like transportation safety, food security, inequality, or government corruption were irrelevant to them? How were such views developed?

Both P06 and P09 reported regular climbing over the Great Wall, but for different purposes. P09 used it mainly for politics while politics was just a minor purpose for P06 and he used it mainly for film watching, following stars and friends studying abroad, and buying and selling music CDs. Moreover, P06 read mainly English content, mainly from the UK and the USA, while P09 accessed mainly Chinese content on blocked websites. Another distinct Internet usage for P06 was using various services to make music or travel friends and to participate in such activities. P06 and P09 reported completely different attitudes towards their ability to make a difference through the Internet and a different degree of online political engagement. P06 believed that his ability to make a difference is tiny and was determined to take some action. P09 expressed worry about the great power and uncertainty of the Internet’s democratising potential and was afraid to take any action that he believed would mislead the public. It would be interesting to explore what made the difference. Why did they use it for different purposes? What websites did they really access? And what content did they read?

The last field, that the author finds most interesting, is a comparative study between Chinese people’s Internet use and understanding and that of their counterparts in liberal democracies. The author studied liberal democracy from literature not from people, especially Internet users, in democratic countries. It arouses the author’s curiosity to know how Internet users in democratic countries use the Internet for political purposes and how they understand their use. What do they think democracy is? How does the Internet affect democracy in their countries? What social or political issues do they think relevant to them? Why do they think they are relevant? How do they use the Internet? What do they use the Internet use for? How do they use the Internet for political purposes? To compare their Internet use and understandings with that of their Chinese counterparts would help to better understand and interpret the democratic potential of individuals’ Internet use in China.

# Appendices

## Appendix I: Interview Guide for In-Depth Interview

1. Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to meet me. My name is Jin Xuelian. I’m a second-year PhD student in the Department of Journalism Studies at the University of Sheffield in the UK. My study tries to understand the Internet use of university students like you, your understanding of your Internet use and its political implications. This is an in-depth interview about your use of the Internet and your understanding of your usage. I am going to give you information and invite you to be part of this research. It may take about one to three hours and the process will be recorded if you agree. I hope that we could go into details of your Internet use and what you really think about your usage. It is up to you to decide whether or not you will participate in the research. Before you decide, you can talk to me about the research. This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask me to stop as we go through the information and I will take time to explain. If you have questions later, you can ask them of me. To protect your privacy, the record will be stored anonymously with a code for the project and destroyed after this project. Any information about your identity will not be released in any of my publications. I have already signed the Informed Consent Form in which your rights are stated. (Show the participant the form.) You can keep it and sue me with this form if my publication brings you any trouble or loss due to the leak of your identity. The webpage of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Sheffield is http://www.shef.ac.uk/ris/other/committees/ethicscommittee. You have the right to ask and leave any time you want during the process without giving a reason. And you also have the right the check the record and notes to see if you are correctly understood. In return for your favour, you could ask me any question that you are interested in after our interview. I also need your signature for the Informed Consent Form to confirm that your rights are concerned and protected. (Show the participant the form.) Please read the form carefully and sign it if you agree. (Read through the form with the participant). Thank you again.

2. Opening questions: demographic features and online skills

2.1 Demographic features

1) Gender (by observation)

2) How old are you?

3).What course do you study?

4) Which year are you in?

5). Where were you born?

6) What course did you study during your senior high school, science or social science?

Online skills: I used the Online skills scale (alpha = .75) created by Brian S. Krueger (2005) which consists of four items

|  |
| --- |
| \_\_\_\_\_ Sent an attachment via e-mail =1 |
| \_\_\_\_\_ Downloaded a program from the Internet =2 |
| \_\_\_\_\_ Posted a file to the Internet =3 |
| \_\_\_\_\_ Designed a web page =4 |

1) Are you able to send an attachment via email?

2) Are you able to download a program from the Internet?

3) Are you able to post a file to the Internet?

4) Have you designed a web page?

3. Key questions: online experience and participant’s understanding

3.1 Habits of Internet use:

Could you please describe your habit of using the Internet? It includes where, when, how frequently and with what device you use the Internet.

3.2 Privacy concern while surfing on the Internet in the dormitory

(It aims to find out if the participants consider politically sensitive topics private or sensitive among their roommates and how Internet use affects their offline discussion with their roommates.)

Usually are your roommates in your dormitory while you are surfing on the Internet?

Do you have privacy concerns while you are online in your dormitory?

If yes, what do you concern about?

Does your privacy concern affect what you do online?

Will you share or discuss with your roommates what you have learned from the Internet?

If yes, what do you share or discuss with them?

3.3 Internet surfing with the mobile phone

What do you do online with your mobile phone?

How frequently do you use your mobile phone to surf on the Internet?

Online activities: general picture

What do you do online?

Could you list all your online activities in the order you usually do when you surf on the Internet?

Online experience and understanding: detailed picture

The researcher took notes of the online activities the participants listed and investigated each online activity in great detail in the order the participants provided. The branch questions varied in accordance with the answers of the participants. Therefore, only the stem questions are listed below.

Online forums:

What online forums do you use?

What is the content of the online forums?

How do you get to know about the online forums?

What do you do with the online forums?

How frequently do you use the online forum?

News and information

Through what Internet applications do you read or search for information or news?

How frequently do you read or search information or news online?

What kinds of information or news do you read or look for online?

Could you describe your online news reading habit?

What will you do after you read a piece of news online?

Could you describe your online information search habit?

Do you share, discuss or comment on what you read or find online?

If yes, through what online and offline channels do you do it?

What do you share, discuss or comment on?

With whom do you share or discuss?

How frequently do you do you do that? (Ask the frequency of each activity)

Micro-blog

Which micro-blog do you use?

Are you anonymous on the platform?

How many micro-blogs do you follow?

How do you classify them?

How do you find them?

Why do you follow them?

How many fans follow you?

How do you classify them?

What do you share, comment on or discuss on your micro-blog?

How frequently do you do that?

Will you share or discuss what you learned from micro-blog through other online or offline channels?

If yes, through what online and offline channels do you do it?

What do you share, discuss or comment on?

With whom do you share or discuss?

How frequently do you do you do that? (Ask the frequency of each activity)

Censorship

Do you have privacy concerns when you read politically sensitive content online?

Does censorship affect what you read or search online?

Does censorship affect what you share or post online?

What kinds of content do you know will be censored?

What do you think of the censorship in China?

QQ (ICQ)

What do you do with QQ?

How many QQ contacts do you have?

How do you group your QQ contacts and how many persons in each group?

How many QQ groups do you have? And what are they?

What do you chat, share or discuss with your QQ contacts or in QQ groups?

How frequently do you use QQ?

Renren

How many friends do you have on Renren?

How do they become your Renren friends?

What do your friends share, post or discuss on Renren?

What do you share, post or discuss on Renren?

Will you share or discuss what you learned from Renren through other online or offline channels?

If yes, through what online and offline channels do you do it?

What do you share, discuss or comment on?

With whom do you share or discuss?

How frequently do you use Renren?

Online participation

Have you participated activities arranged through the Internet?

If yes, could you describe your experience of that activity?

How did you get to know about it?

For what purpose did you do it?

Have you joined organisations or associations through the Internet?

If yes, could you describe the organisation or association and your role in it and your experience with it?

How did you get to know about the organisation or association?

For what purpose did you join it?

Have you organised any activity through the Internet?

If yes, could you describe your experience of the activity?

Have you established any organisation or association through the Internet?

If yes, could you describe the organisation or association and your experience?

Online novels

What kinds of novels do you read online?

How frequently do you read novels online?

Influence

Do your online activities have influence on the Chinese society?

If yes, how do you think does it work?

Do your online activities have influence on you?

If yes, how are you affected?

Does the Internet have influence on the Chinese society?

If yes, how do you think it works?

Do you think the issues and the problems published or discussed online relate to you?

In the interviews, the participants were asked to share with the researcher their understanding of each of their online activities and their understanding of the online content they had encountered.

4. Closing questions

The purpose of the interview is to find out every detail about your Internet use. Do you have anything to add to the previous questions?

Did we miss anything about your Internet use?

Do you have any suggestion or question for my research topic?

Do you have any suggestion or question about the interview?

Did you keep anything from me for private concerns or any other reasons?

If yes, could you tell me the reason?

## Appendix II: Informed Consent Form Template for In-Depth Interviews



**University Research Ethics Committee (UREC)**

http://www.shef.ac.uk/ris/other/committees/ethicscommittee

***Informed Consent Form Template for In-Depth Interviews***

**Informed Consent Form for university students in mainland China who I am inviting to participate in my PhD research, titled “Understanding university students’ Internet use and its political implications in mainland China: using grounded theory”**

**Investigator and Interviewer: Xuelian Jin**

**Position: PhD student**

**Supervisor: John Steel**

**Institution:** **The Department of Journalism Studies, The University of Sheffield, UK**

**Address (UK): 18-22 Regent Street, Sheffield, S1 3NJ**

**E-mail: jop10xj@shef.ac.uk**

**This Informed Consent Form has two parts:**

• **Information Sheet (to share information about the study with you)**

• **Certificate of Consent (for signatures if you choose to participate)**

**You will be given a copy of the full Informed Consent Form**

**Part I: Information Sheet**

**Introduction**

Thank you for agreeing to meet me. My name is Jin Xuelian. I’m a second-year PhD student in the Department of Journalism Studies at the University of Sheffield in the UK. My study tries to understand the Internet use of university students like you, your understanding of your Internet use and its political implications. This is an in-depth interview about your use of the Internet and your understanding of your usage. I am going to give you information and invite you to be part of this research. It is up to you to decide whether or not you will participate in the research. Before you decide, you can talk to me about the research. This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask me to stop as we go through the information and I will take time to explain. If you have questions later, you can ask them of me.

**Purpose of the research**

The Internet has been developing rapidly in China. Many people are interested in how the Internet influences China. I try to understand its influence through the perspective of university students. How do you use the Internet? What do you use it for? And how do you explain and understand your usage?

**Type of Research Intervention**

This research will involve your participation in an in-depth interview that will take about one to three hours.

**Participant Selection**

You are being invited to take part in this research because you volunteered (or your tutor recommended you to me). As a university student, your online experience and your understanding of your online experience can contribute much to my understanding and knowledge of my research topic.

**Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether or not to participate. You can choose to withdraw any time you wish without giving a reason even after you agree to participate.

**Procedures**

If you accept my invitation to participate in the interview, you and I will have a private conversation here in this consulting room (or café) or any other place of your choice. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions during the interview, you may say so and I will move on to the next question. The information recorded is confidential, and no one else except I will access to the information documented during your interview. The entire interview will be recorded, but no-one will be identified by name on the document. The document will be kept in my personal laptop and a digital storage device that can be accessed only by me. The information recorded is confidential, and no one else except I have access to the documents. The documents will be destroyed when the project is closed.

**Duration**

The interview will be held once and will take about one to three hours. You could leave me a means to reach you if you agree to further contact you when questions emerge during the research.

**Risks**

As the research tries to understand every aspect of your Internet use, I may ask you to share with me some very personal and confidential information that you may feel reluctant or uncomfortable to talk about, like politically sensitive content or pornography. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the interview if you don't wish to do so, and that is also fine. You do not have to give me any reason for not responding to any question, or for refusing to take part in the interview. I hope that you could let me know that you don’t wish to answer the question instead of lying when you feel uncomfortable to talk about it.

**Benefits**

There will be no direct benefit to you, but your participation is likely to help me to gain a better understanding about how a university student uses the Internet and how you understand your usage, and thus how the Internet might influence China.

**Reimbursements**

You will not be provided any incentive to take part in the research.

**Confidentiality**

I will not be sharing information about you to anyone. The information that I collect from this research project will be kept private. Any information about you will have a code on it instead of your name. Only the transcription of our conversation will be shown to the coders and be coded, but with all information about your identity concealed.

**Sharing the Results**

My PhD dissertation based on the data I collect from you and other participants will be submitted to my department, my university and to one external examiner. I will also try to publish the results so that other interested people may learn from the research. But nothing will be attributed to you by name. You can receive a summary of the results if you wish and leave your contact detail.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

You do not have to take part in this research if you do not wish to do so. You may stop participating at any time that you wish. I will give you an opportunity at the end of the interview to listen to the record, and you can ask to modify or remove portions of those, if you do not want it to be recorded.

**Who to Contact**

This proposal has been reviewed and approved by University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) which is a committee at the University of Sheffield whose task it is to make sure that research participants are protected from harm. If you wish to find more about the UREC, visit <http://www.shef.ac.uk/ris/other/committees/ethicscommittee> to find out who and how to contact.

You can ask me any more questions about any part of the research, if you wish to. Do you have any questions?

**Part II: Certificate of Consent**

**I have read the foregoing information. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study**

**Print Name of Participant\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Date \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Day/month/year**

**Statement by the researcher/person taking consent**

**I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant, and to the best of my ability made sure that the participant understands the information.**

**I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.**

**A copy of this ICF has been provided to the participant.**

**Print Name of Researcher/person taking the consent\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Date \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

Day/month/year

## Appendix III: An interview invitation letter

**An interview invitation letter**

Xuelian Jin

Jop10xj@shef.ac.uk

Department of Journalism Studies

University of Sheffield

18-22 Regent Street

Sheffield, UK

S1 3NJ

20 Feb 2012

Dear friends:

Thanks for reading this invitation letter. My name is Jin Xuelian. I’m a second-year PhD student in the Department of Journalism Studies at the University of Sheffield in the UK. My study tries to understand the Internet use of university students like you, your understanding of your Internet use and its political implications.

I’m sincerely inviting you to participate in an interview, which is crucial to my research. The interview is about your use of the Internet and your understanding of your usage. It may take about one to three hours and the process will be recorded with your agreement. I hope that we could go into details of your Internet use and what you really think about your usage. It is up to you to decide whether or not you will participate in the research. Before the interview, you can talk to me about the research. You will be given a consent form to inform you of the researcher, the research and ethical issues involved to protect your rights. To protect your privacy, the record will be stored anonymously with a code for the project and destroyed after this project. Any information about your identity will not be released in any of my publications.

You have the right to ask and leave any time you want during the interview without giving a reason. And you also have the right to check the record and notes to see if you are correctly understood. In return for your favour, you could ask me any question that you are interested in after our interview. Drinks and refreshment will be provided during the interview. No other incentive will be provided for your participation.

Please contact Jin Xuelian anytime before 3rd March, 2013 if you decide to participate. I will appreciate your acceptance my invitation. Your perspective will be of significant importance to my research.

Contact detail of Xuelian Jin

QQ: 939922452

Mobile: 86269983

Kindly regards,

Xuelian Jin

*Supervised by Dr. John Steel (The University of Sheffield)*

## Appendix IV: Informed Consent Form Template for Focus Group



**University Research Ethics Committee (UREC)**

http://www.shef.ac.uk/ris/other/committees/ethicscommittee

***Informed Consent Form Template for Focus Group***

**Informed Consent Form for university students in mainland China who I am inviting to participate in my PhD research, titled “Understanding university students’ Internet use and its political implications in mainland China: using grounded theory”**

**Investigator and Moderator: Xuelian Jin**

**Position: PhD student**

**Supervisor: John Steel**

**Institution: The Department of Journalism Studies, The University of Sheffield, UK**

**Address (UK): 18-22 Regent Street, Sheffield, S1 3NJ**

**E-mail: jop10xj@shef.ac.uk**

**This Informed Consent Form has two parts:**

• **Information Sheet (to share information about the study with you)**

• **Certificate of Consent (for signatures if you choose to participate)**

**You will be given a copy of the full Informed Consent Form**

**Part I: Information Sheet**

**Introduction**

Thank you for agreeing to meet me. My name is Jin Xuelian. I’m a second-year PhD student in the Department of Journalism Studies at the University of Sheffield in the UK. My study tries to understand the Internet use of university students like you, your understanding of your Internet use and its political implications. This is a focus group about your use of the Internet and your understanding of your usage. I am going to give you information and invite you to be part of this research. It is up to you to decide whether or not you will participate in the research. Before you decide, you can talk to me about the research. This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask me to stop as we go through the information and I will take time to explain. If you have questions later, you can ask them of me.

**Purpose of the research**

The Internet has been developing rapidly in China. Many people are interested in how the Internet influences China. I try to understand its influence through the perspective of university students. How do you use the Internet? What do you use it for? And how do you explain and understand your usage? How do you see the influence of the Internet in China?

**Type of Research Intervention**

This research will involve your participation in a focus group discussion that will take about one and half hour to two hours. The focus group consists of six participants from six different colleges in this university.

**Participant Selection**

You are being invited to take part in this research because your tutor recommended you to me. As a university student, your online experience and your understanding of your online experience can contribute much to my understanding and knowledge of my research topic.

**Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether or not to participate. You can choose to withdraw any time you wish without giving a reason even after you agree to participate.

**Procedures**

If you accept my invitation to participate in the group discussion, you and other five participants will have a group discussion in the meeting room of the College of Foreign Languages at the Level 1 of its teaching building with me as the moderator. If you do not wish to discuss about any of the questions during the group discussion, you may say so and we will move on to the next question. The information recorded is confidential, and no one else except I will access to the information documented during your interview. The entire interview will be recorded, but no-one will be identified by name on the document. The document will be kept in my personal laptop and a digital storage device that can be accessed only by me. The information recorded is confidential, and no one else except I have access to the documents. The documents will be destroyed when the project is closed.

**Duration**

The group discussion will be held once and will take about one and half hour to two hours. You could leave me a means to reach you if you agree to further contact you when questions emerge during the research.

**Risks**

As the research tries to understand every aspect of your Internet use, I may ask you to share with me and other participants some very personal and confidential information that you may feel reluctant or uncomfortable to talk about, like politically sensitive content or pornography. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the discussion if you don't wish to do so, and that is also fine. You do not have to give us any reason for not responding to any question, or for refusing to take part in the interview. I hope that you could let me know that you don’t wish to answer the question instead of lying when you feel uncomfortable to talk about it.

**Benefits**

There will be no direct benefit to you, but your participation is likely to help me to gain a better understanding about how a university student uses the Internet and how you understand your usage, and thus how the Internet might influence China.

**Reimbursements**

You will not be provided any incentive to take part in the research.

**Confidentiality**

I will not be sharing information about you to anyone. The information that I collect from this research project will be kept private. Any information about you will have a code on it instead of your name. Only the transcription of the group discussion will be shown to the coders and be coded, but with all information about your identity concealed.

**Sharing the Results**

My PhD dissertation based on the data I collect from you and other participants will be submitted to my department, my university and to one external examiner. I will also try to publish the results so that other interested people may learnfrom the research. But nothing will be attributed to you by name. You can receive a summary of the results if you wish and leave your contact detail.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

You do not have to take part in this research if you do not wish to do so. You may stop participating at any time that you wish. I will give you an opportunity at the end of the interview to listen to the record, and you can ask to modify or remove portions of those, if you do not want it to be recorded.

**Who to Contact**

This proposal has been reviewed and approved by University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) which is a committee at the University of Sheffield whose task it is to make sure that research participants are protected from harm. If you wish to find more about the UREC, visit <http://www.shef.ac.uk/ris/other/committees/ethicscommittee> to find out who and how to contact.

You can ask me any more questions about any part of the study, if you wish to. Do you have any questions?

**Part II: Certificate of Consent**

**I have read the foregoing information. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.**

**Print Name of Participant\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Date \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Day/month/year**

**Statement by the researcher/person taking consent**

**I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant, and to the best of my ability made sure that the participant understands the information.**

**I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.**

**A copy of this ICF has been provided to the participant.**

**Print Name of Researcher/person taking the consent\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Date \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

Day/month/year

## Appendix V: The researcher as an instrument

What we bring to the study also influences what we can see. ‘Neither observer nor observed come to a scene untouched by the world’ (Charmaz, 2006, p.15). Therefore, it is of great importance for the audience of the research to know the researcher, one of the important instruments of the research.

The researcher was born in a small village in 1978, the year when the reform and opening up began in China. The village was in Chongqing, in the southwest of China and it contained about fifteen households. It was about an hour’s walk for an adult to go to the nearest town. It took a much longer time to go by bus since it sat in mountains. The researcher’s childhood before she was seven years old was mainly spent there. She spent about a year with her grandmother (her mother’s mother) in another smaller and remoter village during the period her mother gave birth to her younger brother. 1978 was also the year the one-child policy began. Her mother had to leave her village to hide from the family-planning office of the village in order to give birth to her second child. The researcher’s childhood in the countryside was happy and carefree. As far as the researcher can recall, she had no sense of worry or sadness.

Her parents had always wanted to leave the countryside for the town, for a better life. Her father joined the army. At that time, servicemen were assigned jobs in towns or cities when they retired from the army. Her mother was diligent. Her mother worked in a small brick factory as an accountant in the daytime and farmed the land of five people in the night. In 1985 when her father retired from the army and was assigned a job, the researcher moved to Yudong Town and started her primary school life with her father. Her younger brother and grandmother (her father’s mother) still stayed with her mother in the countryside because the unit her father worked for only provided accommodation for one person. A year later, her family reunited in Yudong Town with accommodation provided by the unit.

She was still happy, but she began to have worries with her life in town. She began to notice that most families in town were richer than hers. Their apartments were better furnished, clean and tidy. Their children were better attended and served with better-cooked food. Her parents were too busy making money to feed the family to take care of her brother and her. Her teacher told her mother that she did not do well in her studies because she had not had any education before the primary school. Her family was not well-connected with her father’s family. Her mother’s younger sister and three younger brothers all lived in the countryside, in poorer and remoter villages than her home village. Her family began to help her mother’s brothers and sister since her family moved to town.

After her graduation from Sichuan International Studies University in 2001, she became an English teacher in The Third Military Medical University in Chongqing. She was married in 2002 and her husband also came from countryside. She spent lots of her summer vacations and winter vacations with her husband’s family in the countryside.

She had never realised that her living conditions in her home village were poor until one time in about 2004 when she was viewing photos taken in her village on her computer. She came across a news report about the life of children in poor areas and calling people to help them through donation. The news report showed photos of their houses, their bare feet, and their dirty but smiling faces. The family house of the researcher in the countryside was even shabbier. She could not recall if her face had been dirty, but she was sure that she had been as happy as the owners of the smiling faces were. She had been happy and had never realised that her family needed any economic help. To the researcher, her home village was everything, a beautiful place with mountain views and fresh air, a home, and a reservoir of happy and carefree memories, but a poor village that needed economical help.

Her experience in the countryside and family background has a profound influence upon the researcher. On the one hand, the researcher always wants to be better-off economically through her own efforts and wants to help those in poor economic conditions. On the other hand, the researcher has doubt about whether it is the countryside people who need the economic aid or whether it is we who are economically better-off who want to help others to feel spiritually better-off. Maybe what the countryside people need is understanding and respect of their life. To help people live a better life, more importantly, a happy life is one of the motives that drive the researcher to study and do research.

Another important factor that shapes the design of the research and the interpretation of the results is the researcher’s study of communication. In 2004, the researcher decided to take an MA course as a way to improve herself and also as a life-changing opportunity. She was determined to go to Peking University. She was not so sure about what to study. She tried English literature first since this was what she studied for her BA. Unfortunately or fortunately, she found that she was neither interested in nor good at English literature. There were two choices left for her, education or communication considering lots of factors like interest, possibility of passing the entrance examination, and future development. In the summer vacation of 2005, the researcher went to Peking University and tried to find somebody for advice. And she was lucky. She met the first two important persons on her way to communication study, two new graduates from Beijing Normal University. One of them had taken the last entrance examination for MA in international communication of Peking University and received high scores. She told the researcher all her experience of preparing for the examination.

The researcher began to study and prepare for the coming examination right after coming back to Chongqing from Beijing. The researcher was fascinated by the power of communication and fell in love with communication studies. She failed in the coming examination, but she had the confidence to try for the second time since her total score was above the admission line. Only the score of one subject was a little lower than that required and she had started to learn a new course for only six months. Therefore, she prepared for another year during which she took the summer course of communication studies co-lectured by the College of Journalism and Communication at Peking University and Annenberg School for Communication at University of Pennsylvania. The experience started or re-enforced her determination to go abroad for further study and research.

In 2007, the researcher passed the entrance examination, but failed in the interview. She accepted the offer from Chongqing University and started her MA in communication in the College of Literature and Journalism, with a special interest in political communication. Her MA dissertation studied the influence of the university campus Bulletin Board System on deliberation of university affairs. Her study found that BBS worked to reflect and amplify the power relations in reality instead of shifting the power from one group to another.

During her writing of her MA dissertation, the researcher had been preparing for PhD study abroad, taking English language examinations and applying. In 2009, she received an unconditional offer from the University of Sheffield. But she postponed her registration for one year both because her newly-born son was only four months old and because she lacked the funding. In 2010, the researcher, with the support of her family, decided to accept the offer and start her PhD study. It was a very hard decision. The funding from her employer could only cover half of her total expenses and her family had to borrow about 30,000 GBP to cover the difference. She had to separate from her husband and her son because her husband needed his job to support the whole family.

Her three year study in the University of Sheffield, however, proves that it was a wise decision. The experience is precious and life-changing. It is through the three years study that she found many of her previous views about research and democracy had been superficial. She learned and gained the knowledge, skills, and confidence to conduct real scientific and valid research both qualitatively and quantitatively. Through systematic study of democracy guided by her supervisor and talks with research students from different polities or countries with different degrees of democracy about their understanding of democracy and their government forms, her view that democracy solves all problems has been overturned and she learned about the preconditions for democracy and closely related concepts like ‘conflict’, ‘tolerance’, ‘negotiation’, ‘compromise’, ‘interest group’ and so on, which she had not any idea about their relationship with democracy.

The researcher’s view of who benefits from democracy and who are the driving forces of democratisation has also been changed. She used to think that democratisation was a zero-sum game in which the lower class win while the upper class, especially the ruling class, loose. Therefore, it is the conflict between the lower class and the upper class that drives democratisation. Now she realises that democratisation is actually a win-win game in which all classes win. It is the conflict between the lower class and the upper class, more importantly the conflict within the ruling class in the case of China that drives democratisation.

## Appendix VI: Youg’s Internet Addiction Test

Answer the following questions on the Likert scale:

1=rarely, 2=occasionally, 3=frequently, 4=often, 5=always

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1 | How often do you find that you stay on-line longer than you intended? |
| 2 | How often do you neglect household chores to spend more time on-line? |
| 3 | How often do you prefer the excitement of the Internet to intimacy with your partner? |
| 4 | How often do you form new relationships with fellow on-line users? |
| 5 | How often do others in your life complain to you about the amount of time you spend on-line? |
| 6 | How often do your grades or school work suffers because of the amount of time you spend on-line? |
| 7 | How often do you check your email before something else that you need to do? |
| 8 | How often does your job performance or productivity suffer because of the Internet? |
| 9 | How often do you become defensive or secretive when anyone asks you what you do on-line? |
| 10 | How often do you block out disturbing thoughts about your life with soothing thoughts of the Internet? |
| 11 | How often do you find yourself anticipating when you will go on-line again? |
| 12 | How often do you fear that life without the Internet would be boring, empty, and joyless? |
| 13 | How often do you snap, yell, or act annoyed if someone bothers you while you are on-line? |
| 14 | How often do you lose sleep due to late-night log-ins? |
| 15 | How often do you feel preoccupied with the Internet when off-line, or fantasize about being on-line? |
| 16 | How often do you find yourself saying “just a few more minutes” when online? |
| 17 | How often do you try to cut down the amount of time you spend on-line and fail? |
| 18 | How often do you try to hide how long you’ve been on-line? |
| 19 | How often do you choose to spend more time on-line over going out with others? |
| 20 | How often do you feel depressed, moody or nervous when you are off-line, which goes away once you are back on-line? |

## Appendix VII: Other Internet use

Findings of participants’ use of online shopping, music, games, downloading, novels, literature, magazines, and email are presented in Appendix VII, because participants’ reports contribute little to a better understanding of the studied topic or are not sufficient to generate saturated categories.

*Table 95. Online shopping: channel, window shopping, buying and selling*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Channel | Window shopping | Buying | Selling |
| P02 | Taobao (laptop and mobile phone) | “I love surfing on Taobao most. I surf on everyday sale, flea market, second-hand market, digital space, and many others. I feel that a great of variety of commodities fills me with passion.” | Lots of things were brought online, bags, cups. |  |
| P04 | Taobao |  | Mainly clothes, lots of others stuff like mobile phone case |  |
| P05 | Taobao |  |  |  |
| P06 | Taobao |  |  |  |
| Ebay |  | Buy CD. “It started because some could not be bought on Taobao. I asked in QQ CD group and they told me to buy them on Ebay. That was how I knew I could buy on Ebay and started to do it. It was almost only buying when I was in junior high school.”  “Sometimes I will purchase of a good number of products which will be in great demand and sell them when they are out of production.” | The third step online is “to log on to Ebay to check if there is any selling on my Ebay shop.”  Sell CD:  “Sell CD, to sell extra copies or some I do not want through ‘auction’ or ‘buy it now’. There are no regular customers.”  Started to sell since senior high school:  Unstable income:  “The income is unstable. Sometimes I do not log on to sell anything for a month. But I earned more than 2,000 RMB the last month.” |
| P07 | Taobao; Jingdong |  |  |  |
| P08 | Taobao; Jingdong |  | View other buyers’ comments on the products whenever shopping online |  |
| P09 |  |  | Began since university,  Will consult the online price when shopping |  |
| P10 |  |  | Shop online and doubt about the price in physical shops |  |
| P11 | Taobao |  | Buy clothes and shoes frequently |  |
| P12 |  |  | Sometimes online shopping |  |

*Table 96. Online shopping: communication and networking, and understanding*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Channel | Communication and networking | | Understanding |
| Instant messaging | Personal space |
| P02 | Taobao (laptop and mobile phone) | **Bargain:** “I like to communicate with shopkeepers, to bargain. …I enjoy doing so.” | “Share what I brought with Taobao friends and read theirs”: “You register with an account. There will be lots of friends, and also followers. It is something like microblog. For example, you share what you have brought.”  “I have a big group of online shopping friends. I feel that since I went shopping online, my classmates, people around me, my neighbours all followed me and went shopping online. They have their own accounts of Aliwangwang and Taobao.” | Enjoy: “Online shopping becomes a pleasure of my life since university. I feel like I am obsessed to online shopping. Probably not obsessed. It has both positive and negative sides.” |
| P06 | Taobao |  |  |  |
| Ebay |  |  | As a controllable part-time job:  “As a controllable part-time job, the income is unstable…just to earn myself some extra money.” |
| P09 |  |  |  | Doubt about prices in physical shops, too expensive compared with online shops |

Chinese online shopping service providers offer special services to their clients including instant messaging between shopkeepers and customers, customer rating system and personal space for customers to share what they brought and their shopping experience.

*Table 97. Online music*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Channel | Activities | Frequency |
| P01 | Renren;  Sina Weibo | Follow an online music broadcasting station on Sina Weibo: Its music appeals to the middle class. Listen to the music and occasionally the prose accompanying the music.  Watch music videos, listen to music, search information and criticism about a piece of music, and also share them. | Frequently |
| P02 |  | Listen to a piece of music a friend recommends till bored of it. |  |
| P08 | Spring wind piano website | Download piano scores | Often |
| P09 |  | Like listening to music and search knowledge and information about music |  |
| P10 |  |  | Mentioned |

*Table 98. Online games*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Channel | Game | Frequency |
| P03 | Qzone | Web-game: Q pet game  His girlfriend’s web-game | In the evening when there is time available;  Daytime |
| P05 | Dota (Defence of the Ancients) & QQ | Dota; online card game | Sometimes, the worst time she played one or two days of an online card game. |
| P06 | World of Warcraft | World of Warcraft | One a week, two to three hours a time. Sometime not once in a month. “I am not interested in games and just play this one.” |
| P07 |  |  | Mentioned playing online games |
| P09 |  |  | Mentioned playing online games |
| P10 |  |  | The most important use of the Internet is online gaming. |
| P12 |  |  | Frequently: “My hobby before was games.” |

*Table 99. Downloading*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Channel | Message | Frequency |
| P03 | “Search online to find what I want” | Music; games |  |
| P04 | “More than 10 platforms stored in labels which I get to know through various ways. Someone told me. I found it myself or happened to know it.”  “Lots of platforms, cannot name them. There are lots of websites, especially those for fans.” | Videos of earlier years, stars’ performance, English learning materials, movies, music | Download while doing other activities online |

*Table 100. Online novels*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Topic | Frequency |
| P01 | Meaningless novels, fictional novels | During the whole winter vacation |
| P02 | Mininovels | Occasionally |
| P03 | Fictional novels | Before bedtime, when surfing with mobile phones |
| P12 |  | Mentioned |

*Table 101. Online literature*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Content | Habit | Frequency |
| P02 | Poems, prose and mininovels | “I share good articles and mininovels through Weibo, Qzone, and Renren.” | Low |

*Table 102. Online magazines*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Magazine | Message | Frequency |
| P05 | Global Entrepreneur <http://www.gemag.com.cn/>; most frequently read recently, others cannot remember |  | Sometimes |
| P11 |  |  | Sometimes |

*Table 103. Email*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ref | Channel | Usage | Frequency |
| P02 | 163 email |  | Frequently |
| P05 | 163 email |  |  |

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1. http://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21574628-internet-was-expected-help-democratise-china-instead-it-has-enabled?fsrc=scn/tw/te/pr/agiantcage (Consulted on 20/04/2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/04/chinas-communist-party-isnt-really-afraid-of-the-internet/274992/> (Consulted on 20/04/2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Municipalities in China are usually directly governed by provinces and provinces by the central government. There are four municipalities directly under the central government. They are Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Chongqing. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Morozov’s (2011) notion of the West. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ban Gu (Chinese: 班固; 32–92 AD) was a Chinese historian and poet in the Eastern Han Dynasty (Chinese: 东汉，Dong Han, 25–220 AD) and was best known for his part in compiling the *Book of Han*, or *History of the Former Han Dynasty*. (Chinese:《汉书》 or 《后汉书》，*Han Shu* or *Hou Han Shu*). The book covers the history of the Western Han Dynasty from 206 BC to 25 AD. The Han Dynasty (Chinese: 汉朝，Han Chao, 206 BC – 220 AD) was the second imperial dynasty in the history of China. It was briefly interrupted by the Xin Dynasty (Chinese: 新朝，Xin Chao, 9 – 23 AD) and separated into two periods: the Western Han (Chinese: 西汉，Xi Han, 206 BC – 9 AD) and Eastern Han (Chinese: 东汉，Dong Han25 – 220 AC). The *Book of Han* is one of the most important history books in China. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *The Book of History* (Chinese:《尚书》 or《书》 or《书经》, *Shangshu*, *Shu*, or *Shujing*) is a compilation of documentary records of events related to the Royal families in ancient China. It is one of the five classic works of Confucianism. The title is translated in Western texts variously as *‘Classic of History’*, *‘Classic of Documents’*, *‘Book of History’*, *‘Book of Documents’*. The Announcement of Duke Shao is a chapter of the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Analects* (Chinese:《论语》，Lunyu), or the *Analects of Confucius*, is considered a record of the words, discussions and acts of Confucius and his disciples. It is the representative work of Confucianism. The version used here is named the *Translation and Explanation of Analects*, published by Shanghai Press of Classic Works in 2004, available at <http://ctext.org/analects/yan-yuan>. [Accessed 25 April 2011]. The original Chinese words are ‘君君，臣臣，父父，子子’. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Burning of the Books: It is recorded in *The Book of History* (Chinese:《尚书》, *Shangshu*, see note 2) and The *Records of the Grand Historian* (史记，Shiji). The latter is the first systematic Chinese historical text. It was written by Sima Qian (Chinese: 司马迁，145 or 135 BC – 86 BC), a [Prefect](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prefect) of the Grand Scribes (Chinese: 太史公, Tai Shi Gong, the official of the highest rank) of the [Han Dynasty](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Han_Dynasty) and covered [Chinese](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/China) history from the time of the [Yellow Emperor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_Emperor) (the first ruler whom Sima Qian considered sufficiently established as historical to appear in the Records, traditionally dated around 2600 BC) until his own time. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. It was recorded separately in two chapters of the *Book of Han* (Chinese:《汉书》, *Han Shu*), the biography of Dong Zhongshu and the biography of Emperor Wu of Han. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The civil service examination system was a system to select officials for the government in imperial China. It lasted for 1,300 years from 605 AD in the Sui Dynasty (Chinese: 隋朝，Sui Chao, 581-618 AD) to 1905 AD in the Qing Dynasty (Chinese: 清朝, Qing Chao, 1644 – 1912 AD) and had great influence in China’s history. The examination tested the candidates’ knowledge of the Confucian classics. It guaranteed the governmental officials’ quality and capability to a large extent and provided a channel for individuals to climb up the social hierarchic ladder. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Some scholars (eg. Goldstein, 1995; Kluver, 2005, in Schlaeger, 2013) would prefer to use the term of the Leninist system instead of the Soviet-style system. It is more accurate to term it as ‘a socialism model with Chinese characteristics’ (HARP, 2012; Harvey, 2007; Hwang, 2011; Marolt, 2014; McCormick, 1992;Ng, 2013; Weber, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *China Daily*, April 29, 2011 <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2008-10/29/content_7155686.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Special economic zones are designated areas that possess special economic regulations different from other areas in China. Moreover, these regulations tend to be more free-market-oriented, contain measures that are conducive to foreign direct investment and give the local government more freedom. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The Ministry of Education of PRC, Education Document No. 006, ‘Experimental Reform Measures of Job Assignment of 1985 Graduates of Shanghai Jiao Tong University and Tsinghua University’. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The report card is a certificate issued by the municipal commission of education for every graduate from college and university to transfer their personal information documents when they report to their employers. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The report card is a certificate issued by the municipal commission of education for every graduate from college and university to transfer their personal information documents when they report to their employers. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The statistical data is collected from *Blue Book of Development and Reform: No. 1 Report on China’s Economic Development and Institutional Reform – China: 30 Years of Reform and Opening-up (1978-2008)*. The chief editor is Zhou Dongtao and the vice editor is Ouyang Rihui. It is published by the social sciences academic press (China) in 2010. Available at: <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/68294/131889/index.html>. [Accessed 30 April 2011] [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Zhou Dongtao and Ouyang Rihui, 2010. *Blue Book of Development and Reform: No. 1 Report on China’s Economic Development and Institutional Reform – China: 30 Years of Reform and Opening-up (1978-2008)*. The Social Sciences Academic Press (China), Beijing. Available at: <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/68294/131889/index.html>. [Accessed 30 April 2011] [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Cheng Yejun, 2010. 30 Years of Reform and Opening-up. *People Daily Online*. Available at: <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/40557/134502/137173/index.html> [Accessed 30 April 2011] [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Yu Peiwei & Han Lihua, 2010, Section 2: 30 Years of Opening-up: remarkable achievements, Chapter 10: Our Country’s 30Years of Opening-up, in Zhou Dongtao & Ouyang Rihui, 2010. *Blue Book of Development and Reform: No. 1 Report on China’s Economic Development and Institutional Reform – China: 30 Years of Reform and Opening-up (1978-2008)*. Available at: http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/49154/49155/7963874.html [Accessed 25 April 2011] [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Anonymous, 2010. *Top Ten Events of Civil Society Development in China in 2009. People Daily Online*. Available at: <http://gov.people.com.cn/GB/56590/10823238.html> [Accessed 2 May 2011] [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Wang Haibo, 2008. Great Achievements of Economic Growth in China: On 30 Years of Reform and Opening-up. *The Chinese Economic Times*, July 22nd, 2008. Available at: <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/49150/7544659.html> [Accessed 8 May 2011] [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The Engel coefficient is the proportion of income spent on food. The Engel's law states that the Engel coefficient falls as income rises (Chen & Qin, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The original figures are available at the website of National Bureau of Statistics of China <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/>, for GDP <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2010/indexch.htm>, and for the Engel coefficient <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2010/indexch.htm>. [Accessed 9 May 2011] [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The Unified National Higher Education Entrance Examination (Chinese: 高考，Gao Kao) is an academic examination held annually in the [mainland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mainland_China) of the [People's Republic of China](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People's_Republic_of_China). This examination is a prerequisite for entrance into almost all higher education institutions at the [undergraduate](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Undergraduate) level. It began in 1952, was disrupted by the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1977, restored in 1977, and continues to function ‘til present. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Zhou Dongtao and Ouyang Rihui, 2010. *Blue Book of Development and Reform: No. 1 Report on China’s Economic Development and Institutional Reform – China: 30 Years of Reform and Opening-up (1978-2008)*. The Social Sciences Academic Press (China), Beijing. For Chapter 24, 30 Years of Educational Reform and Development, available at: <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/49157/49166/8142858.html>. [Accessed 10 May 2011] [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Section 12 The Number of Higher Education Institutions, Chapter 20 Education, Science and Technology, *China Statistical Yearbook 2009*. Available at <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2010/indexch.htm>. [Accessed 10 May 2011] [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The original figures are from Section 12 Population by Education Level Chapter 3 Population, *China Statistical Yearbook 2009*, available at: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2010/indexch.htm>, and Section 4 Basic Statistics on National Population Census in 1953,1964,1982 and 1990 (middle of year), Chapter 3 Population, *China Statistical Yearbook*, available at: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/ndsj/information/zh1/c041a>. [Accessed 10 May 2011] They provide the population aged 6 and over by education level. I calculated the rate by dividing the population aged 6 and over by education level by the total population aged 6 and over. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Section 10 The Number of Graduates and Chinese Overseas Students, Chapter 20 Education, Science and Technology, *China Statistical Yearbook 2009*, available at: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2010/indexch.htm>. [Accessed 10 May 2011] [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Chinese overseas students who returned to China after their graduation. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Song, S. & Zhang, K. H. 2002. Urbanisation and City Size Distribution in China. *Urban Studies,* 39**,** 2317-2327. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Kojima, R. 1995. Urbanisation in China. *The Developing Economies,* 33(2)**,** 121-54. p.132. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Section 4 Composition of Urban and Rural Population, Birth rate, Death rate, and Natural Growth Rate of Provinces and Regions, Chapter 3 Population, *China Statistical Yearbook 2009*, available at: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2010/indexch.htm>. [Accessed 11 May 2011] [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Section 3 Composition of Population in the Three Sectors, Chapter 4 Employed Population and Payments, *China Statistical Yearbook 2009*, available at: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2010/indexch.htm>. [Accessed 11 May 2011] [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Section 10 Development of Radio Broadcasting, Television and Movie Chapter 21 Culture, Sports and Health, *China Statistical Yearbook 2009*, available at: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2010/indexch.htm>. [Accessed 20 May 2011] [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Publication of Books, Magazines and Newspapers in *2009*, Culture, \*National Data*, available at: http://data.stats.gov.cn/workspace/index;jsessionid=8281E289287DB31EDC8D78372F43E33D?m=hgnd. [Accessed 28 November 2013] [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. The Atlantic, URL (consulted 12 December 2011):

    <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/02/google-china-and-chinese-college-students-part-iii/71146/#bio>. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. When McCracken (1988) referred to the qualitative interview, he meant the long interview. As another important qualitative interview, the in-depth interview is the same in this sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. The number was calculated by the researcher based on the statistics provided by The Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China (<http://www.moe.edu.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/s7255/201303/149856.html>, consulted at 10th May, 2013). The rate of in-school PhD students against the population of university students = the number of in-school students of Doctor Degrees / the number of in-school students of Doctor’s Degrees + the number of in-school students of Master’s Degrees + the number of in-school undergraduates in normal courses. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. According to Lewis (2010), locating the West or Western civilisation is not geographically natural. It is a complex and unresolved issue. Therefore the thesis tries not to use the categories of the West and the rest unless the referred literature or the participants use it. Instead, the thesis employs a standard of democracy and non-democracy to differentiate the studied countries and regions. In the Chinese official discourse, the West refers to the Western capitalist countries, especially the United States and the Western European countries. The participants understand the West as the Western democratic countries. Therefore, Western values refer to their values. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. <http://news.qq.com/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Big Chongqing Website <http://cq.qq.com/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. <http://www.xunkoo.com/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. http://www.sina.com.cn/. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. http://news.baidu.com/. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. http://news.qq.com/. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. <http://www.people.com.cn/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. <http://www.putclub.com/>, <http://mail.163.com/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. PPS is a P2P (peer to peer) online TV website. <http://www.pps.tv/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. <http://www.ifeng.com/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. http://www.neweekly.com.cn/. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. http://www.newoo.com/. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Google’s search service was relocated to Hong Kong, but was not blocked yet in the PRC when the field was conducted in 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. China National Knowledge Infrastructure <http://www.cnki.net/> , one of the biggest databases of academic writing and publication in China. It is owned mainly by three public universities in China. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. [http://www.weibo.com/drhint#!/1749579857/info?from=profile&wvr=5&loc=tabinf#profile\_tab](http://www.weibo.com/drhint#!/1749579857/info?from=profile&wvr=5&loc=tabinf), consulted 31/05/2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. <http://www.weibo.com/314117444?from=profile&wvr=5&loc=tabprofile#_rnd1370083341036>, consulted 01/06/2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. http://www.weibo.com/yaochen#!/1266321801/profile?from=profile&wvr=5&loc=tabprofile#profile\_tab, consulted 03/06/2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. The official website of The Power of Hiking <http://www.kpictures.cn/index.php/home-sub.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. http://www.weibo.com/chenkun#!/1087770692/profile?from=profile&wvr=5&loc=tabprofile#profile\_tab, consulted 03/06/2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. http://www.weibo.com/chenkun#!/1087770692/profile?from=profile&wvr=5&loc=tabprofile#profile\_tab, consulted 03/06/2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. See some examples of his blogs: http://www.scmp.com/comment/blogs/article/1122061/there-always-power-tribute-southern-weekly, (Han, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. <http://www.weibo.com/1197161814/profile?from=profile&wvr=5&loc=tabprofile#profile_tab>, consulted 05/06/2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. <http://www.weibo.com/1195403385/profile?from=profile&wvr=5&loc=tabprofile#profile_tab>, consulted 05/06/2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. <http://www.weibo.com/1182389073/profile?from=profile&wvr=5&loc=tabprofile#profile_tab>, consulted 05/06/2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. <http://www.weibo.com/u/1413971423>, consulted 27/06/2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. http://www.weibo.com/hejiong, consulted 27/06/2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. <http://www.weibo.com/yuminhong>, consulted 27/06/2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. http://weibo.com/p/1035051684388950/info?mod=pedit\_more, consulted 05/02/2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Also known as the Death of Wangyue. She was a two-year-old Chinese girl who was run over by two vehicles on the afternoon of 13 October 2011 in a narrow road in Foshan, Guangdong. As she lay bleeding on the road for more than seven minutes, at least 18 passers-by skirted around her body, ignoring her. She was eventually helped by a female rubbish scavenger and sent to a hospital for treatment, but succumbed to her injuries and died eight days later. The closed-circuit television recording of the incident was uploaded onto the Internet, and quickly stirred widespread reaction in China and overseas. Many commentators saw this as indicative of a growing apathy in contemporary Chinese society (From Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Wang_Yue> ). The accident was widely covered by English media such as the BBC. (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15401055>, Retrieved 13 October, 2012), The Guardian (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/9907601>, Retrieved 13 October, 2012), The Wall Street Journal (<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203752604576645033136435572.html>, Retrieved 13 October, 2012), and The Telegraph ([http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8840381/Chinese-girl-run-over-by-a-car-dies.html#](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8840381/Chinese-girl-run-over-by-a-car-dies.html), and <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8841840/As-Chinese-hit-and-run-girl-dies-passersby-claim-they-did-not-see-her.html>, Retrieved 13 October, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. An online forum aiming at providing free categorised information for local communities. It now has more than 320 divisions in major cities in China. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. A commercial website which provides information about IT information and current prices of computers, mobile phones, digital products, software and so on to common users and dealers and claims itself the first portal specialised in IT. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. A commercial website which provides information about IT information and current prices of computers, mobile phones, digital products, software and so on to common users and dealers. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. A commercial website which provides information and news about IT industry, technology, and software download for IT technicians and professionals and claims itself the biggest Chinese IT community in the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. a commercial website which provides information about IT information and current prices of computers, mobile phones, digital products, software and so on to common users and dealers. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. An online forum aiming at providing free categorised information for local communities. It now has more than 320 divisions in major cities in China. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. The principle of democratic centralism is an important feature of ‘democracy with Chinese character’. It also means ‘the lower level being subordinate to the higher level and ‘the minority being subordinate to the majority’ (Hayhoe, 1988). More importantly, it means a single ruling party system (Shambaugh, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. A Singapore based Chinese newspaper <http://www.zaobao.com.sg/english/english.shtml>, Retrieved 13 October, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. News about people’s welfare: or so-called Minsheng News on news portals or online forums. It is a very popular column in China. It includes news about every aspect that affects people’s life, including government policies, corruption, misconduct, power abuse, natural disasters, environmental pollution, food security, people’s daily life, difficulties they experience, and so on. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. The official website of Chongqing Municipal Government: <http://en.cq.gov.cn/AboutChongqing/2007/6/12/981918.shtml>. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. **United Way of America**, based in [Alexandria, Virginia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexandria,_Virginia), is a [non-profit organization](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-profit_organization) that works with nearly 1,300 local United Way offices throughout the country in a coalition of [charitable organizations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charitable_organization) to pool efforts in [fundraising](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundraising) and support. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)