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# "Trendingworthiness" and "prosumers" on Weibo: social media doxa and consumerism in a ritual field

Zhengjia Liu  
*University of Iowa*

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“TRENDINGWORTHINESS” AND “PROSUMERS” ON WEIBO:  
SOCIAL MEDIA DOXA AND CONSUMERISM IN A RITUAL FIELD

by  
Zhengjia Liu

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Doctor of  
Philosophy degree in Mass Communications  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2014

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Dan Berkowitz

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy  
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To my dear mom

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## ABSTRACT

The study explores reasons for certain events trending on Sina Weibo – the most popular Chinese micro-blogging site – and cultural meanings of consumption in trending topics. Conceptually, it indicates that social media practice is more than a technical product, but it is also a cultural phenomenon that conveys cultural meanings. Multiple data were collected through a pilot study, a two-month online observation focusing on three trending topics, and 34 in-depth face-to-face interviews. This e-ethnography study finds that Weibo is a Chinese cultural product in the global trend of marketization and social networking. Also, it is rooted in the overall political and economic environment of the Chinese media industry. Freedom of choice and equality in the market are two doxa found in this field. The Weibo rituals present a negotiation of prosumers' political, economic and cultural identities. Neo-liberal elites become crucial agents who lead in this field. The Weibo field demonstrates social media's reliance on the money line to push the Party line.

In general, this dissertation argues a cultural paradigm of studying social media phenomena. It demonstrates how media phenomena are culturally constructed for society members to make meanings of their social lives. It goes beyond the limitation of a normative paradigm that makes judgments about whether media are contributing to—or harming—democracy. Instead, it provides a conceptual foundation to: begin to understand media phenomena by placing them within their original social context instead of a different context; to conclude the interpretation of the phenomena by integrating them with the bigger conceptual picture; and to eventually enable theoretical conclusions which will be transferable to other contexts.



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## PREFACE

While I was organizing the numerous data for this dissertation, a scene from a documentary about the mysterious Tiananmen Protest came to my mind. Let me contextualize how I was able to watch the documentary first. It was my junior year in college. A tech-savvy friend, Yiran, gave me an untitled DVD and said, “You might be interested in this. I got this by unblocking the Great Firewall.” Later, I found out it was an illegal copy of Richard Gordon and Carma Hilton’s *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*. Older people have occasionally mentioned the protest to me in personal conversations, but the issue is still a taboo in public even today. I had no memory of it, since I was only three years old at that time. So, I watched the documentary, which was a very thorough and thoughtful masterpiece. The scene that impacted me the most and piqued my curiosity showed a student leader explaining his disappointment about a collapsed negotiation with the Party leaders: “What do we really want? I need the freedom of choice to buy Nike shoes; I want the freedom to hang out with my girlfriend in bars. That is the freedom we want.”

Unconsciously, I was haunted by this quote and retained my curiosity about the freedom described by the student leader. For my undergraduate honors project, I wrote a research paper about the legal identities of digital media consumers, although I was majoring in Maritime Law. (I have to thank my undergraduate advisor, who made the exception that allowed me to do something that really interested me.) For my Master’s thesis, I surveyed female college students in Shanghai to analyze their psychological and sociological motives for reading fashion magazines. Now my curiosity, which began with that brief scene from an illegal DVD, had led me to my dissertation. Dan always says, “Please prepare to answer the question ‘what your dissertation is about?’” My shortest answer is, “It is about consumerism and social media in a transitional society.” Actually, though, the interplay among media, consumerism and society has been the continuous

research theme in my ten-year adventure in higher education. All along, I have been trying to understand what consumption – political, economical, and cultural – means to the urban Chinese in the contemporary media environment. Therefore, this dissertation is not only a summary of my doctoral studies but also a story of my previous decade. And personally, this dissertation is also about myself: how do I contextualize myself as a Chinese native, an international student in the U.S., and a consumer in the global market?

Although this dissertation is specifically about urban Chinese society, it is also one example of the ways in which digital media is expanding worldwide. Hopefully, my work will give readers, even those with different cultural backgrounds, some new ways to understand the continuous relationship between media and society. Mark Twain wrote, “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness”. Modern-day “travel” can take place simply in the reading about—and thus, the understanding of—unfamiliar cultures. Thus, my hope is that this research will result in new shared understandings that bring together people from different cultures and obliterate destructive barriers.

Last but not the least, this dissertation is for everyone who has supported my doctoral studies. I have named them in the acknowledgments.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The Red Cross of China probably never thought that its public reputation would collapse overnight because of a 20-year-old woman's Sina Weibo content. Weibo is the umbrella term for Chinese micro-blogging sites. It is similar to Twitter but also incorporates some elements of Facebook and YouTube (Polumbaum, 2012). Sina Weibo is the most popular Weibo site (Williams, 2014; Zhao, 2012). The controversial woman was Guo Meimei, whose profile information showed that she held a senior position at an institution affiliated with the Red Cross Society of China (RCSC). On her Weibo, Guo Meimei showed off a luxury lifestyle: she owned a Maserati and a Mini Cooper; she also had a closet of Hermès handbags. When she travelled, she always chose the business-class cabin. Guo's Weibo has drawn public attention since June 20, 2011. About 200,000 Weibo feeds were about her mysterious position and wealth. Though Guo explained later that her affiliation with RCSC was faked and her mother was a millionaire who supports her life, the public still tended to believe that she had an affair with some senior-level executive in RCSC, and that her riches were from the charity institution's appropriation of public donations. This was not the first scandal that the Red Cross faced, but it was the first to really hurt its reputation. As a result, the Red Cross of China's donations plummeted dramatically. In August 2011, several local branches did not receive any donations (Wong, 2011; ifeng.com, 2011). Also, the public repeatedly mentioned this issue, when RCSC's credit was in question. (One chapter in this dissertation is also related to RCSC's crisis and Guo's mysterious identity.)

Guo's case led my interests to the deeper reasons why a Maserati car or Hermès handbags quickly evoked Weibo users' intense anger against the charity institution. It motivated me to explore reasons for certain events trending on Weibo and cultural meanings of consumption in trending topics. Conceptually, as this case indicates, social media practice is more than a technical product, but it is also a cultural phenomenon that conveys cultural meanings.

Therefore, the central point of this dissertation is to argue for the use of a cultural paradigm in the study of social media phenomena. In the transitional Chinese society, Weibo is studied as an example to understand social media in a non-Western context. This study focuses on the relationship between social media and the society that produces it. Also, it attempts to place social media within the continuous relationship between media and society. It argues for contextualizing social media phenomena within the macro social background. Therefore, this study questions a technological determinist point of view that simplifies the digital world as a universal identical phenomenon. The cultural paradigm, on the other hand, treats social media phenomena as artifacts that demonstrate significant values and meanings in society. In Weibo's case, by examining consumerist values in trending topics, this study discusses how users negotiate their Chinese political, economic and cultural identities in the global market. By contextualizing Weibo within transitional China, this study will be able to discern how consumerism is packaged with nationalist and neo-liberal narratives in the society, and how this mobilizes the public through social issues to construct cultural narratives on social media platforms, as well as to make meanings of participation in social rituals. In other words, social media can be understood as ritual fields (Bourdieu, 1973,1986;



Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993; Carey, 1992; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Vos, Craft, & Ashley, 2012), in which a society negotiates consumerist values.

In the social media field, doxa— a system of shared unspoken values that construct cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2005; Schultz, 2011; Vos, et al., 2012) – determine events’ “trendingworthiness,” which is parallel to “newsworthiness” (Schultz, 2011, p.88) in the journalism field. Those trendingworthy events can be understood as ritual for prosumers – people who are simultaneously content producers and consumers (Deuze, 2006) – as agents, who negotiate cultural values in society. Also, since journalism doxa incorporate meanings from both journalistic professional culture and culture in a larger society (Berkowitz, 2011; Schultz, 2011), social media doxa correspondingly echo meanings from both digital culture (one crucial component being consumerism) and culture in society.

To explore these concepts, the study employs multiple methodological techniques. The first section describes a pilot study, which was a textual analysis of a Nike post and its reposts on Weibo during the 2012 London Olympic Games. This section explores possible techniques to collect data. Following the pilot study, a two-month online observation was conducted. It noted trending topics during those two months and focused on three cases that illustrate consumerism within social rituals. The first case was Hong Kong’s ban on baby formula exports to Mainland China. The second case was the Central China Television’s (CCTV) Consumer Rights program accusing Apple of offering lesser warranties to Chinese consumers. The third case involved private charities’ donation campaigns after the Ya’an earthquake. For each case, cultural narratives and storylines were identified and analyzed. To further understand consumerist meanings in these three

trending topics, I interviewed 34 creative professionals, who were experts on Weibo communications. Integrating findings from all these sections, the study discusses neo-liberal values reflected through trending topics; the negotiation of prosumers' political, economic and cultural identities; and neo-liberal elites as crucial agents in Weibo rituals.

Conceptually, this study intends to move research on social media from a descriptive phase to a more theoretical phase. As Wimmer and Dominick (2006) point out, media research on new phenomena often follows such a path – from exploring what it is to discussing deeper meanings, from a micro level on specific cases to a macro level on social impacts, from deductive description to inductive interpretation. The cultural paradigm in this study helps lay out the interaction between media and society. It demonstrates how media phenomena are culturally constructed for society members to make meanings of their social lives. More importantly, it goes beyond the limitation of a normative paradigm that makes judgments about whether media are contributing to—or harming—democracy. Normative judgment may easily fall into a false dichotomy and neglect dynamic and complex negotiations in society. Media are the platforms that present such negotiations.

Additionally, social media phenomena very easily become out-of-fashion, since the digital world is changing rapidly. New media products are emerging all the time. For example, when I first started my dissertation proposal, Weibo was one of the most popular sites in China. In a lunch break conversation during an international conference about Chinese media in 2013, one organizer said, “We got too many papers about Weibo, too many.” Interestingly, when I interviewed creative professionals a few months later, many of them asked me, “Why are you still doing research about Weibo? No one cares

about Weibo Now. Everybody is talking about WeChat (an App similar to WhatsApp).” In fact, a solid conceptual framework helps strengthen a study’s transferability and can defend a study’s relevance and timeliness. In this study, Weibo serves as an example to demonstrate how a cultural paradigm works in social media settings and to illustrate how media are grounded in social context. In other words, the specific media platform works as a device for media scholars to look into historical and cultural narratives which have been constructed and reconstructed by the society.

Moreover, a solid conceptual framework creates the dialogue between the context and the global communication world. On the one hand, many scholars have criticized a cultural imperialist point-of-view to test how non-Western media fit into models, indexes or norms which have been concluded from Western context. Those paradigms presume the West as the standard and ignore cultural diversity and differentiations. On the other hand, when a study over-emphasizes the context, it may easily lose the big picture. For example, scholars have noted that many studies of Chinese media narrowed themselves within the unique political and economic conditions and failed to highlight their contributions to the overall media studies field (Meng, 2010). The cultural paradigm in the current study provides a conceptual foundation to: begin to understand media phenomena by placing them within their original social context instead of a different context; to conclude the interpretation of the phenomena by integrating them with the bigger conceptual picture; and to eventually enable theoretical conclusions which will be transferable to other contexts. Therefore, the current study is not simply another “Weibo study” or another “China paper.” It is a study about social media and consumerist culture which illustrates the interaction between media and society.

However, my emphasis on a conceptual framework by no means implies a neglect of the context. In fact, the conceptual framework allows me to provide a more authentic interpretation of social media's role in the transitional society. Since the cultural paradigm rejects taken-for-granted norms of the media's contribution to Westernized democracy, it frees the study from a control-versus-resistance dichotomy. The current study does not presume a fight between the regime and the society, but instead attempts to manifest interactions between the government and the civil society. It aims to illustrate the dynamics of the transitional society that have a much longer history and much more complex social stories than do many Western societies.

In the following chapters, I will further explicate the conceptual framework, the context of Chinese media and society, my research questions, the multiple methods used, the findings of each case, and the overall conclusions.

## CHAPTER II

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL MEDIA AS A RITUAL FIELD

This chapter elaborates on the conceptual framework of the whole project. It begins with a literature review of social media studies, and then explains the rationale behind the use of a cultural paradigm and explicates field theory as the study's theoretical foundation.

Social media is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) as

forms of electronic communication (as Web sites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos).

It is users' participation which makes social media different from conventional mass media. Content is created and shared by users. The distinction between content producers and consumers is blurring (Mandiberg, 2012). The term *prosumer* is introduced to describe people who are simultaneously content producers and consumers (Deuze, 2006). Media scholars have been studying the motivations, effects, and meanings of users' engagement based on various paradigms and from different levels of analysis.

In general, media studies usually follow a path developing from a descriptive level to a more conceptual level. Social media studies are no exception. Wimmer and Dominick (2006) proposed four phases of research when a new medium emerges. The first phase studies the medium itself; the second one is about uses and users; the third one investigates social, psychological and physical impacts of the medium; and the fourth phase focuses on improving the medium. For instance, boyd and Ellison (2007) summarized the history and previous scholarship involving social networking sites (SNS)

and proposed a definition which points out that users mainly communicate with people in their existing network rather than looking for strangers. Similarly, Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011) developed a typology to categorize different functions of social media, such as identity, presence, relationships, reputation, groups, conversations and sharing. These descriptive studies illustrate a general picture of social media communication and provide a solid step to further develop research.

To understand media and society, scholars can explore phenomena from an individual level, an organizational level, a professional level, a societal level or a cultural level (Berkowitz, 2011). For instance, at the individual level, a study was conducted which was interested in consumers' behaviors of brand evaluations and purchase intentions in social media settings (Naylor, Lamberton, & West, 2012). At the organizational level, one study examined social media use among MBA programs for education and marketing (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013). At the professional level, a study discussed public relations professionals' challenges of measuring social media campaigns (Luo & Jiang, 2012). In another study, Wasike (2013) found that social media editors in newsrooms tend to be more personal when communicating with their audience. Also, they tended to post more articles with technology frames, compared with print editors, who preferred human-interest frames. When moving to the societal level, many studies addressed social media's role in democratic movements. For example, by comparing social media uses in the 2012 Arab Spring and 2011 London Riots, Cohen (2012) found that meaningful texting became a type of action in today's social movements. One story can be narrated in different ways on social media. Moreover, Pearson (2013) discussed

the ironic dilemma of having new ethical codes for serious bloggers and citizen journalists while also defending online expression free from governmental censorship.

Though communication on social media is different from conventional mass media, research on social media is not completely isolated from research on conventional media. Particularly, exploration of social media's societal role follows a social construction approach in journalism studies. In journalism studies, the social construction approach debates the potential for accurately reporting reality against unavoidable bias. Political and economic forces behind the news industry are the main focus in the debate (Berkowitz & Liu, n.d.). As part of the continuous discussion of media and democracy, at the societal level, much scholarship also emphasizes social media's impact on resistance, both political controls and economic manipulations (Papacharissi, 2009). Such continuous concern reminds scholars to be aware of the unchanged components between media and society, while we study the parts that do change. This calls for cultural-level studies which contextualize social media within the historical relationship between media and society.

As mentioned earlier, the study argues for a cultural paradigm while studying social media. Culture, by definition, is a shared way of thinking, feeling and believing in a given society. For society members, culture seems as natural as air (Deuze, 2006) and is taken for granted as "the default setting of software" (Saldana, 2011, p.6). Members of a culture may not be consciously aware of those shared values, norms or beliefs, but they practice them in daily life. It is culture that makes sense of members' social activities. In modern society, social events are ritualized by mass media to reinforce shared significance.

Therefore, the cultural paradigm explores media phenomena from a macro level. It discusses shared significant values and meanings for users to engage in social media and explores how their engagement constructs and reconstructs on-going social legacies in society. It focuses on interactions between media and society, instead of narrowing in on specific cases, individuals or institutions. Three aspects of the concept of culture are commonly discussed in media studies (Berkowitz, 2011). First, culture in media studies combines the points of view from modern anthropology and the symbolic construction of reality, by analyzing myth, narrative and rituals which emerge in media phenomena, in order to understand the society behind the media. In other words, media text – similar to anthropological artifacts – is used as a device for scholars to study deeper social meanings.

Further expanding this concept to the current global context, the second aspect argues for considering the cultural diversity of media phenomena. Social media seem to be technological products with universal standards. In fact, they are also cultural products conveying unique and diverse meanings (Ang, 2013). For example, a recent cross-cultural survey found that Chinese online users are extremely engaged in commercial and political content. Their online activities dramatically differ from users' activities in Western industrialized countries (Bolsover, Dutton, Law & Dutta, 2013). To understand such unique phenomena, it is imperative to study social media from both the original social context and the global background.

The third aspect of culture follows the British cultural studies tradition that emphasizes ideology, hegemony and power relations. This is not the focus of this study, because of the study's context. Too much Western-based research of Chinese media



limited their discussions by assuming a stable tension between the government and the society or stereotypical political and economic forces' impacts on Chinese media. As a result, historical background, dynamic social relations and dramatic social transitions were over-simplified. The details will be elaborated on later in the context chapter.

To explicate the cultural paradigm, field theory provides a theoretical perspective to understand cultural meanings of social media in this study. *Field* is the concept proposed by Bourdieu (1973, 1986, 2005; Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993) to conceptualize social relation space, which includes competitive hierarchies of economic, cultural and social capitals. Field theory treats a field as a social institution. In social media settings, field theory explores how different social forces and values construct “game rules” in a field. The theory does not narrow discussions on specific issues produced by specific media within a specific social context. It argues that the media field has never been completely overruled by political/economic powers. Instead, the field has established its own rules, boundaries and values and been interacting with social forces from macro to micro levels.

Adopting Carey's (1992) notion that communication is grounded in the entire relationship between media and society, this study intends to build up the conceptual framework of the social media field, starting with comparing it to the conventional journalism field (Figure 1). Applying field theory to journalism studies, scholars are interested in (1) the relationship between the journalism field and the larger society and (2) the dynamic hierarchy within the field (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Vos, et al., 2012). Correspondently, applying field theory to study social media, I focus on (1) the relationship between social media and the larger society and (2) the dynamic hierarchy within the field.

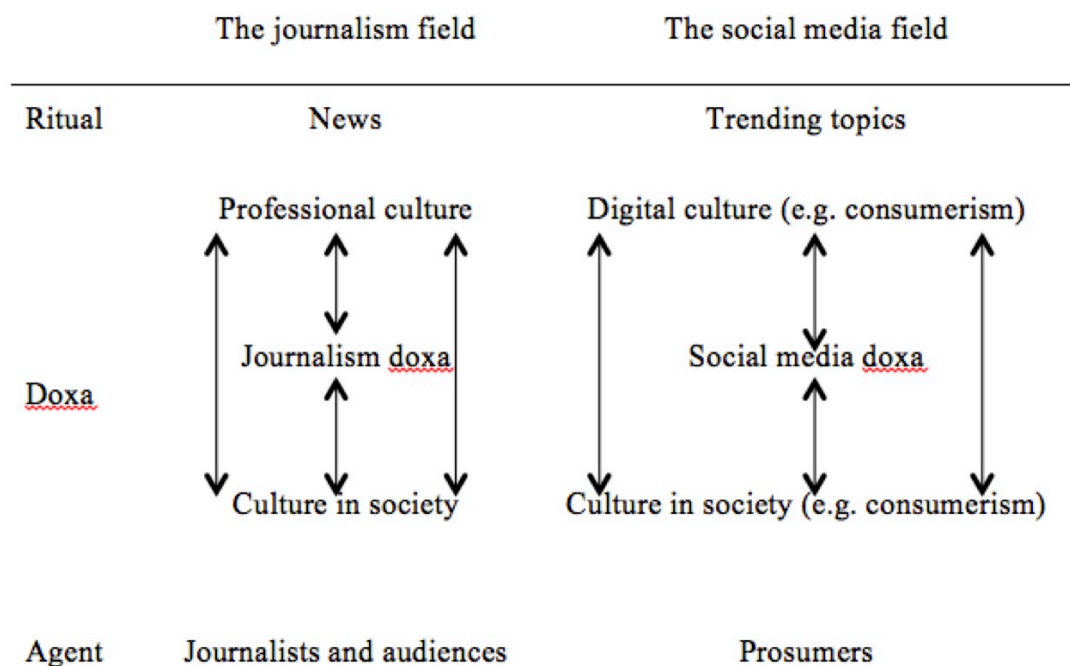


Figure 1 The Analogy between the Journalism Field and the Social Media Field

Culture influences the journalism field through the criteria of “newsworthiness.” For instance, in Danish newsrooms, journalistic doxa include six values: timeliness, relevance, identification, conflict, sensation and exclusivity (Schultz, 2011). Those values are different from American journalistic doxa, which refer to eight enduring values in American society: ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderatism, social order and national leadership (Gans, 1979). Therefore, “newsworthiness” varies across cultures.

Newsworthy values are important in the journalism field from at least three points of view. First, for media professionals, those values provide templates which are used to craft stories of any unexpected social events, particularly “what-a-story” news (Tuchman, 1997), to meet deadlines and to meet the organizational and public expectation of “good

news” (Berkowitz, 1997). Second, for audiences, those shared values create an easy interpretive connection. Because stories unfold in an expected way, audiences can easily understand the background and sequence of media stories (Berkowitz, 2011). Third, doxa are repeatedly reinforced in media-presented events. Those events are similar to rituals in traditional society, for members in a modern society to practice shared rules, norms, collective beliefs, social structures, and power relations (Bird & Dardenne, 1997; Carey, 1992; Durham, 2011).

To be parallel with “newsworthy” (Schultz, 2011, p.88) in the journalism field, social media doxa can be named as “trendingworthy” values, which determine whether certain events trend in social media. Social media provide the online platforms that allow participants to construct public or semi-public profiles and to interact with other users within the system (Lange, 2007). My focus is particularly on micro-blogging sites, which are defined as the digital media that allows “users to share brief blasts of information (usually in less than 200 characters) to friends and followers from multiple sources including websites, third-party applications or mobile devices” (Hermida, 2010). As journalistic doxa are constructed by journalism culture and the larger culture in society, social media doxa are formed within both digital culture and the larger culture in society.

Digital culture refers to the preferred values shared in both online and offline societies as a mix of culture and computer technology (Deuze, 2006). In digital media research, consumerism is consistently discussed as an important component of digital culture, because the Internet and all websites, software, and digital applications have been developed for profitable purposes. Being commercial is one of the crucial characteristics of digital culture (Ahmad, 2010; Deuze, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Harrison & Barthel, 2009;

Lange, 2007; Marwick & boyd, 2010; Papacharissi, 2002, 2009). For example, Papacharssi (2009) points out that in the digital world, the civic critiques of public affairs are in a narcissist consumer-review style.

Consumerism is the unstable cultural expression and manifestation of consumption behaviors and is associated with construction of identities, formation of relationships, and framing of social issues (Miles, 1998). For instance, consumption of high-tech products is interpreted as supporting scientific and social progress; consumption of popular music is packaged with peace and love; consumption of fashion is illustrated as part of a high-end lifestyle. Also, consumption of media is highlighted as participation in public affairs (Miles, 1998). Even charity donations are commonly used in commercial campaigns (King, 2006). In general, symbolic values of consumer goods are endowed with social significance. Therefore, to understand construction of social media doxa also means to understand how enduring cultural values are expressed by users through consumerist narratives.

A crucial difference between social media and conventional media is users' autonomy in media-presented rituals. Previous media audiences now become prosumers – people who are simultaneously content producers and consumers (Deuze, 2006). Conventionally, social rituals are crafted by journalists – the agents of the journalism field. Now, prosumers – the agents of the social media field – have more control in selecting and recrafting patterns in social rituals. Also, the construction of journalistic doxa is bound within the institutional process of news production (Berkowitz, 2011; Schultz, 2011), but large amounts of social media text is not produced in any institutions

or with any professional criteria. All these new features create possibilities for prosumers to negotiate values and norms in society.

However, social media doxa maintain the same feature of journalistic doxa as being bound by the larger culture in society. Much like journalists, prosumers have different roles and positions in a society, and are still members in their society (Reese, 2011). Particularly, social media communication features instant and emotional engagement (Sundet & Ytreberg, 2009). As journalists use enduring cultural patterns to craft stories to meet deadlines, doxa allow prosumers to compose and disseminate social media texts in a very short period of time. In addition, cultural values in the journalism field build interpretive connections between journalists and their audiences. In social media, shared cultural values can quickly create interpretive connections among prosumers. For instance, nationalist narratives in the Nike campaign feed were able to immediately connect large numbers of Chinese Weibo users (Liu & Berkowitz, 2013a). Therefore, enduring cultural values are still part of the rituals presented by social media.

In summary, when trending topics are conceptualized as rituals in social media, doxa are the unspoken rules of the rituals and are shared by prosumers who perform rituals in the field. To further understand consistency and difference between social media doxa and journalism doxa, media scholars need to contextualize social media within consumerist digital culture and the larger society. By exploring the social media field, we can have a better understanding of dynamics and nuances of cultural values in a society. Therefore, in this study, Weibo is exemplified as a ritual field, through which the Chinese society negotiates consumerist values.

### CHAPTER III

#### CONTEXT: EMERGENCE OF MICRO-BLOGGING IN A TRANSITIONAL SOCIETY

Weibo is the umbrella term for Chinese micro-blogging sites. It is similar to Twitter but also incorporates some elements of Facebook and YouTube (Polumbaum, 2012). Each Weibo feed can be up to 140 Chinese characters, and can include emoticons, pictures, videos, and hyperlinks. Also, Weibo includes an instant message function. Therefore, these sites are more than micro-blogging but also include all functions described in social media's definition (Sina Weibo Wikipedia, n.d.).

Weibo has been exploding in China since 2009. The latest data shows that by December 2013, the total number of Weibo users in Mainland China reached 281 million, which equals about 45.5 percent of the entire Chinese online population. In addition, about 39.3 percent of mobile netizens use Weibo via their cell phones (CNNIC, 2014). Sina Weibo claims that the number of its global registered users has reached 300 million<sup>1</sup> (Zhao, 2012). A recent report showed that the number of Sina Weibo's active daily users has reached 60 million and the number is still increasing (Xue, 2013). About 80% of Sina Weibo users are highly educated. In terms of their consuming capacity, the data is even more impressive. On average every month, the total number of Weibo users' consumption expenditure is about 800 billion, which is eight times the entire cost of the 2012 London Olympic Games (Sina Weibo, 2012). The majority of users are from Guangdong, Beijing and other coastal provinces, which are the wealthy areas of China.

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<sup>1</sup> CNNIC only reported Weibo users in Mainland China. Sina's data includes global users.

Sina Weibo has a verification system for users whose identities have been checked. Many of these users are celebrities, public intellectuals, and persons involved in high-profile issues. The identify system is open to the public. Anyone can apply for a verified account by submitting personal information such as an ID, education information, job contact, job title and other information to the site's verification system. Once the identification is confirmed, the user's handle will be attached to a golden "v" icon. There are about 300 thousand verified individual accounts on Sina Weibo (Wang, 2012).

In addition to individual users, Sina Weibo has institutional accounts. About 530 thousand institutions such as media groups, brands, companies, governmental agencies, and websites have verified accounts, whose handles are attached to a blue "v" icon. About 130 thousand brands and companies registered accounts on Sina Weibo by the end of February 2012, as a recent available report showed (Sina Weibo, 2012). On average, each of these accounts has more than five thousand followers. The most popular company accounts are from IT and e-commerce industries. More than 86% of their followers are aged 18 to 39; 55.7% are male and 44.3% are female. Most of these companies are based in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, the three first-tier cities. About 1,060 international corporations and brands have Sina Weibo accounts. Among them, 208 are American companies and 178 are Japanese companies.

It is vital to point out that Weibo are Chinese sites, and the "Chinese" here mainly means the language instead of the state. As many Chinese media scholars have pointed out, we should be very cautious in using the nation as unit of analysis, because the nation is so divided by regions, languages, socio-economic status and cultures. In fact, the nation as a constructed identity is part of this study's discussion. The three cases in this

study also show that Weibo phenomena mainly reflect interests of people who possess certain purchase power. I will explain this later in detail in the findings chapter.

Moreover, though Sina Weibo has English versions, and feeds can be in other languages, communication takes place mainly in Chinese. Therefore, I am more confident in defining Sina Weibo as a social media site in the Chinese language than a social media site of the entire country or nation.

Since Weibo became popular, media scholars have been interested in this rising phenomenon. As the most popular Weibo site, Sina Weibo is the main subject of much research. From a descriptive level of analysis, scholars find that Weibo appeals to its users in its instantaneity, sharing and mobility (Li, 2011; Qiu, 2011; Wang, 2011). These studies intuitively laid out characteristics of Weibo communication and answered questions such as what the medium is and what makes it functionally different from others. Another study focused on Weibo as a powerful medium for disseminating alternative information, critical questions, and public discontent not usually published in conventional mass media. For instance, several studies discussed occurrences of high-profile social issues, such as the Wenzhou train crash accident and the Yushu earthquake in 2009 (Iyer & Wu, 2012; Li & Rao, 2010; Liu, 2012). In these cases, Weibo discussions pushed the boundaries of conventional media and evoked intense social interactions. In general, these societal-level studies follow the sociological vantage point of media studies, focusing on the possibility of accurately presenting reality and unavoidable constraints.

In the context of China, the political constraints are usually the main focus of media studies. Actually, this focus is not unique in Weibo studies but has become the norm in



studies of Chinese media in general. Social media are not isolated from the enduring relationship between media and society. To better understand Weibo, we need to contextualize the media within the larger society.

### China: Changing Society and Changing Media

The emergence and popularity of Chinese social media cannot be separated from China's post-reform transitional society. In 1978, China's Communist Party (CCP) initiated the national economic and political reform program. The program has established a limited market economy, in which the state's plans intervene. Economic and technological development has become the main theme for the nation. Since 2001 when China rejoined the World Trade Organization (WTO), the nation has further embraced the global market. In the political field, the regime has switched from Mao's totalitarianism to Deng's authoritarianism and has gradually withdrawn from some aspects of citizens' social lives (Lee, 2003). From the political economy perspective, scholars have observed the ideological expansion of neo-liberal capitalism in the nation.

In the Western context, neo-liberalism emphasizes a globally free market and recasts governmentality "as non-political and non-ideological problems that need technical solution[s]" (Zhao, 2008b, p. 25). In the Chinese context, neo-liberalism maintains its emphasis on a market economy and technological solutions, but fragments into ideological factions advocating for different political agendas. The more conservative coalitions defend a powerful government to protect the nation's interests in global competition. They believe that Western democracy – in essence the American *new imperialism* – does not fit into China's culture. The more progressive coalitions posit that the current political system conflicts with a free market economy. They believe that the

government has been interrupting healthy and beneficial market competition and argue for further Westernized political reform (Li, 2010; Lieberthal, 2004; Zhao, 1998, 2003, 2008a, 2008b).

### The Changing Media Environment

As the political and economic environment has been changing in society, the Chinese press system has been less monolithically manipulated by government than it once was (Donald and Keane, 2002; Polumbaum, 2008; Zhao, 2003, 2008a, 2008b). The media industry started its own reform program in the 1990s, which accelerated when China entered the WTO in 2001. As a result, the Chinese press system has become more commercialized and more focused on audience interests (Lee, 2003).

Also, as scholars consistently point out, press control in China has never been operated through any formal, institutionalized, and universalized pre-publication censorship apparatus. Instead, news organizations self-censor news content and report to the regional party's propaganda departments, which have the authority to intervene in the news process. Reporters may face ad hoc punishments if the published content has crossed an acceptable line, which is also situational to the specific context. Therefore, there are considerable chances for local party committees and news organizations to advocate for their own agenda (Polumbaum, 1994; Zhao, 2008b). In addition, younger generation journalists are brought up, educated and trained in a more open social environment and are unwilling to equate propaganda with news when pursuing their professional dream (Polumbaum, 1994, 2008). The changing media are not only the result of the reform program but also are playing roles in this transitional society. For example, the neo-liberal newspaper, *Southern Weekend*, is well known for its over-the-

line reports, which resulted in several chief editors being punished (Lee, 2003; Shirk, 2010; Zhao, 2008b). In China's recently shifting technological society, scholars have observed, the Internet further allows netizens to bypass official control as they access information, engage in public debates and develop independent opinions (Lei, 2011; Tan, 2006; Xiao, 2011; Xiao & Polumbaum, 2006; Yang, 2009; Zhou, 2005). Users' autonomy in cyberspace reveals Chinese society's resistance to the regime's political authority. Particularly, communication on Weibo happens at a dramatically fast speed. Though there is a complex online censorship system in China, certain content on Weibo can spread across large numbers of users before it is censored (Polumbaum, 2012).

It is vital to point out that liberalization does not equate with democratization, even though progressive neo-liberal elites are often praised as democratic reformers (Zhao, 1998). Liberalization merely aims to deconstruct absolute political power, while democratization includes the reconstruction of power structures (Zheng, 2008). By examining several social phenomena, Zhao (2008a) warned that Chinese neo-liberal media, just like Western liberal media, widely represent the interests of business corporations and liberal elites. As Zhao (1998, 2003, 2008a, 2008b) observed, these progressive media are not independent from authoritarian power but are associated with the progressive neo-liberal coalition in power. In the 1980s, the pioneering progressive newspaper – *World Economic Herald* – was protected by Zhao Ziyang's authoritarian government, thus its agendas of political reform never went against Zhao's policy. When Zhao stepped down from power during the Tiananmen demonstration in 1989, the newspaper was immediately closed. Similarly, in the current environment, the Southern Media's proactivity is associated with the regional Party committee's liberal leadership.

In general, from the political economy perspective, Zhao (1998, 2003, 2008a, 2008b) concluded that Chinese media struggle between the Party line and the money line.

In fact, the tension between political control and social resistance has been the primary focus of research on China's media in the last three decades (Akhayan, 2012). A limitation of the control-versus-freedom paradigm is that it has been predominately influenced by Western liberal democratic beliefs. It assumes a stable power dichotomy between the Chinese government and the Chinese society, and implies that the government is always the reason behind social problems (Yu, 2009; Zheng, 2008). As a result, this paradigm provides little emic understanding of nuances and dynamics of Chinese cultural dimensions (Akhayan, 2012).

For instance, researchers have found that Chinese audiences in general have a very low level of trust of the conventional media. Governmental censorship is believed to be the major reason behind such distrust (Li, 1994). In fact, audiences' distrust may also result from Chinese journalists' elitism. As opposed to Western journalists' roles as bystanders who mediate the elites' opinions for the public, Chinese journalists have the tradition of directly collaborating with elites (Polumbaum, 1990; Li, 1994). Neo-liberal media, such as *Southern Weekend*, actively support the neo-liberal elites' political appeal for further market freedom. Such an agenda is distinctly different from the state's plan of having consistent governmental intervention in the market economy (Liu & Berkowitz, 2013b).

Based on the control-versus-freedom paradigm, audiences should like the neo-liberal media, because these media do not follow the state's agenda. However, this is not necessarily the case. In the neo-liberal media's agenda, the West is the model to follow

rather than an enemy/competitor to fight with. Such discourses are in conflict with the public's resistance against the West's disrespect and insolence regarding Chinese culture and tradition (Gries, 2004). As a result, the neo-liberal media are attacked as “un-Chinese” and biased toward Western ideology (Han, 2011). In addition, since the early stage of China's modernization movement, the neo-liberal elites have been viewing themselves as already-educated thinkers, and the masses as still-to-be-educated (Schwarcz, 1986). Such arrogance also weakens audiences' support of the neo-liberal media. Also, Schwarcz (1986) observed that the enlightenment movement in China has been struggling with the patriarchal clan system's oppression of humanism since the 1920s. Family and other collective groups' interests are valued over individual interests, since individual interests are criticized as selfish. This norm conflicts with liberal beliefs, such as freedom of choice. In other words, liberalism in China lacks solid historical ground (Gao, 2013). In general, audiences' distrust of conventional media – regardless of its origin or division – is diverted to enthusiasm in cyberspace, since the Internet allows audiences to enjoy a consumer-style autonomy.

### Consumerism in China

In the context of China, the control-versus-freedom paradigm also implies that the dominance of consumerism in the society is a result of the government's strategy to divert public attention from political demands (Lee, 2003; Wei & Pan, 1999). However, empirical evidence may not support such an implication. First, neo-liberal media also use consumerist narratives to promote a political appeal that restrains the authoritarian regime's absolute suppressions (Liu & Berkowitz, 2012; Zhao, 2008b). Second, consumerist values have been supported not only by the current Communist regime.

Consumerism is not new in the current post-Mao Chinese society but was also found in the 1930s, when the Chinese first encountered the global market (Chan, Cui & Zhou, 2009; Zhao & Belk, 2008a). It also existed in the history of China's previous transitional moments. Third, the popularity of consumerism is also found in other post-socialist countries, so it may be related to dramatic social and ideological transformation. For example, Ger and Belk's (1996) cross-cultural materialism study finds that Romanians and Ukrainians are more materialistic than people in well-developed industrial countries such as America and the U.K. Both Romania and Ukraine are now democratic countries, whose political systems are different than China's, but all three societies are experiencing post-socialist transitions and embracing the dominance of consumerist ideology.

Since consumerism is an unstable cultural articulation, it is flexible enough to be packaged with any ideological factions (Miles, 1998) and also to be reconstructed within enduring cultural contexts (McCracken, 1990; Miles, 1998; Sunderland & Denny, 2007). For instance, Chinese consumerism is associated with nationalism. Nationalism is defined as an imaginary social construct that creates a collective identity among individuals who feel belongingness for their given nation (Benedict, 1991). In China's patriarchal clan system, nationalism is also a manifestation of collectivism (Schwarcz, 1986; Tu, 1984). A national survey project in 2008 showed that the Chinese people felt the highest level of nationalism compared with people in other countries, such as the U.S., Canada, South Africa, Venezuela, and Japan (Tang, 2011). Actually, in 1930, advertisements of Western products were packaged via images of traditional Chinese scenarios (Zhao & Belk, 2008a). Today, consumerist narratives still incorporate the discourse of supporting the nation's development (Liu & Berkowitz, 2013b; Zhao & Belk, 2008b). Consumers prefer

to have Chinese celebrities, particularly sports stars, as spokespersons, because those stars can evoke nationalist pride (Zhou & Belk, 2004).

The Chinese nationalist movement is also tied into the theme of technological progress. Since 1840, when the Chinese Empire's historical legacy collapsed because of Westerners' invasion, the Chinese have deeply believed that the nation was defeated by Westerners' advanced technology (Schwarcz, 1986). Technological progress would therefore be the crucial strategy to achieve national salvation. For more than 150 years, different elite groups have launched their own technological development movements. When the current economic reform was initiated to reestablish the nation's power, Deng Xiaoping's saying, "Science and technology are the primary productive forces" became a guiding slogan (Lieberthal, 2004). Consequently, consumption of technology is articulated with meanings of support for the nation's development.

Therefore, consumerism in China should not be reduced to simply a result of political manipulation but should be understood through the cultural background. In other words, scholars need to go beyond normative judgments of media phenomena in China. We need a more detailed understanding of how political resistance processes act in people's daily lives. Similarly, consumption is not all about economic manipulation and exploitation. People consume products but also consume meanings of products. A single product's value can be associated with significant values in the macro society. A simplified dichotomist point-of-view would diminish these authentic and vivid social dynamics.

This current study indeed aims to explore the connection between the Weibo phenomenon and the contemporary Chinese consumerist culture, in order to understand

significant social values, norms and beliefs associated with consumerism. Based on the conceptual framework and context, the study proposes three research questions.

***RQ1:*** What are the values which make certain events “trendingworthy” on Weibo? How are they reflected through trending topics?

***RQ2:*** What do Weibo doxa illustrate about Chinese consumerist values? How are the enduring cultural values in Chinese society expressed through consumerism in Weibo rituals?

***RQ3:*** Who are the crucial agents in Weibo rituals? To what extent are they similar to/different from journalists in the conventional journalism field?



## CHAPTER IV

### METHODOLOGY: E-ETHNOGRAPHY

This chapter elaborates the methodology used to execute the research's theoretical framework. The definition of eEthnography is explained. The rationale and process of the three techniques are discussed. My self-reflection during the data collection is also covered.

To answer the research questions, I conducted an eEthnography study. eEthnography is the methodology used to study the communities and cultures created through digital-media-based social interaction. Conventional ethnography studies the lived culture shared in a community (Geertz, 2005), while eEthnography studies the lived culture shared on online networks or among online community members (Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff & Cui, 2009; Kozinets, 2010).

eEthnography follows the general methodology principles and rigorous requirements of ethnography, such as having both emic and etic interpretation and data triangulation. *Emic* refers to the insiders' lens: "[T]he study of culture begins with the understanding of how people understand themselves" (Rosaldo, 1997, p.30). To get emic views, researchers should engage as participants with communities of interest. For example, in his seminal work on Balinese cockfighting, Geertz (2005) particularly emphasizes that researchers should participate in local activities, such as running with local people even when they run from the police. Therefore, to get the insiders' perspectives, I observed Weibo discussions. I also utilized local key informants; I've worked in two creative agencies in China and my previous co-workers helped me recruit participants and answered some clarification questions. In addition, I conducted member-

checking to make sure that I understood the local perspectives accurately. My background as a native Chinese also allows me to quickly understand the historical context of Chinese media. As Paechter (2013) posits, being an insider allows the researcher to enter the process more easily, though there are considerable risks to being an insider in ethnography, such as ignoring “obvious” things. *Etic* refers to the researcher’s interpretation as an outsider (Handwerker, 2001). In contrast to journalists who only aim to accurately present what was said and done, ethnographers are expected to explain contextual significance and cultural differences to enhance communication across cultures (Geertz, 2005; Singer, 2009). My experience of being in the U.S. for five years while receiving academic training gives me a different point of view to think about the culture that I grew up in, which allows me to make etic observations as an outsider.

To have multiple data to achieve triangulation – the criteria for any qualitative research (Angrosino, 2007; Kozinets, 2010; Saldana, 2011) – the project includes three sections: a pilot textual analysis, online observation and face-to-face in-depth interviews. Since few studies have used eEthnography to study the Weibo phenomena, I first conducted a pilot study to explore possible methodological techniques. Later, a three-month observation focused on trending topics, as they were rituals in the social media setting. The purpose of the face-to-face interviews was to refine findings from the observation.

### Pilot Study

The pilot study analyzed a high-profile commercial feed and responses to it on Weibo. On August 7, 2012, past Chinese Gold Medalist Liu Xiang dropped out of the 2012 London Olympics 110-meter hurdles and hopped to the finish line after sustaining

an injury near the start of the race. Within minutes, Liu's image, along with a message of national support, was repurposed into a Nike advertising feed on Sina Weibo. The feed read:

Who has the courage to start over from the peak, with the injured body and the irreconcilable heart? Please know that *1.3 billion people* are hopping with you till the end. #Find Your Greatness#. Let's #fight with Xiang#!

An hour later, about one hundred thousand Chinese Sina Weibo users had reposted this campaign feed (Sina Weibo, 2012). In fact, the 2012 London Olympic Games have been called *Weibo Olympics* in China (Song, 2012). In total, the number of Sina Weibo feeds related to the London Games reached 393 million by August 13, 2012 – the day after the Olympics ended (Sina Weibo, 2012). Interestingly, rather than news of gold medals won by Chinese athletes, controversial issues led to more intense Weibo discussions. For instance, more than 37 million feeds concerned Liu Xiang's injury, compared with only four hundred thousand feeds about China's Yi Silin winning the first gold medal of the Games (Song, 2012).

My exploration of Weibo as a cultural product started with this case, since it was a trending topic that involved intense discussions. There was a commercial brand as an important actor in this issue. Therefore, the case matches the research purpose, so that I chose this issue to try possible techniques of data collection. The first problem that I faced was how to get data. Sina Weibo only disclosed the Top 20 daily trending topics. The site does not disclose how it calculates the order of the trending topic list. For each topic, only the latest 1000 feeds are searchable. Access to the entire database is only authorized to specific data analysis agencies or institutions. These agencies usually serve business institutions by collecting and analyzing Weibo feeds for profitable purposes, so

the data is very expensive. Even though some agencies agreed to offer me a specific discount for academic research, the price was still far beyond affordability. For example, to get a very brief report of all the reposts of Nike's feed, such as key words, key reposts, or basic demographic information of participating users, the cost was about 900 USD after the discount. An alternate way to access quantitative data is to rely on published reports. For example, Sina occasionally releases updated numbers from Weibo in their financial reports and public relations materials. However, these reports only include numbers that look positive. Also, the whole database is still not open to the public. Then I tried to find some published academic works on Weibo. However, only one study extracted a large enough dataset (Fan, Zhao, Chen & Xu, 2013). The study traced sentiment correlations in Weibo and found that anger is more likely to evoke interactions on Weibo. However, the authors did not specify their sampling strategy. I could not determine if the dataset fit into my research purpose.

Based on these failed attempts, I figured that it was inefficient to collect quantitative data. Also, since my goal was to study meanings of the text, quantitative methods may not be the best fit. For instance, in the Weibo emotion study (Fan et al., 2013), the authors determined a Weibo feed's emotion by emoticon used. In the cases that the emoticon is used in a satirical way, the actual meaning can be totally opposite from the way it is being coded. Instead, a close qualitative reading can better identify a text's meaning within its context. Therefore, I conducted a qualitative analysis to analyze Nike's feeds and its reposts. To do this, key themes of Nike's original feed were first identified. Next, I read the reposts starting from the very first one, since on Sina Weibo reposts of a feed are listed in chronological order under the original one. When reading

the reposts, I began to identify emerging opinions. In total, there were more than one hundred thousand reposts, and I stopped reading at the two thousandth repost, the point at which no new opinions appeared, suggesting that data saturation had been reached (Debessay, Naden & Slettebo, 2008; Saldana, 2011). That repost was created four minutes after the original feed was released. As a third step to confirm this saturation, I read two hundred more reposts in reverse-chronological order. No new opinions were found. After the first-round analysis, I did a second-round analysis to categorize common themes, core debates and general storylines (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Fairclough, 1995; Saldana, 2009, Schröder, 2002), comparing these with themes in the original feed.

The pilot study found that three themes emerged from Nike's feed and its reposts: (1) ritualized consumerism, (2) packaged nationalism and (3) consumer sophistication. *Ritualized consumerism* was demonstrated by Nike being a significant actor in this sports ritual on Weibo. *Packaged nationalism* addressed how Nike's feed packaged nationalist meanings with its brand and how users reconstructed the package. *Consumer sophistication* illustrated how Weibo users, as Nike's consumers, responded to the brand's manipulation (Liu & Berkowitz, 2013a).

The pilot study had two major findings. First, consumerist narratives have been ritualized in micro-blogging communication – Weibo has changed the way that members participate in social rituals, but the importance of enduring cultural narratives remains much the same. In this study, it was noticeable that the commercial agent – Nike – became an important actor in the sports ritual. Those Weibo prosumers had been waiting for the commercial agent's interpretation, which also became the basic narrative for them to further reconstruct meanings. This phenomenon should be understood within the

context of Chinese media. Weibo prosumers are also the audiences of conventional media. They actively engage in discussions of social issues, but hold very low levels of trust of the conventional Chinese mass media – Weibo allowed them to enjoy a consumer-style autonomy. In this specific case, Nike was picked by prosumers as an important actor in the story. This choice was not a coincidence, because Nike quickly created a resonant interpretative connection with them. Second, the instantaneity of Nike's campaign aligned with characteristics of micro-blogging communication (Li, 2011; Qiu, 2011; Wang, 2011). However, the importance of such instantaneity was not simply its physical appearance but also the *meaning* of that appearance. Nationalism, in Nike's interpretative package, was an enduring theme shared in Chinese society that quickly resonated with prosumers to add perspective to the athlete Liu's Olympic performance. Additionally, much like journalists in conventional media, who rely on pre-existing narratives to craft unexpected stories, Weibo prosumers relied on well-known narratives to interpret social events. These prosumers were culturally familiar with the packaging together of nationalism and consumerism. Thus, Liu's previous success was interpreted through nationalist meanings and incorporated into consumerist products, while his previous injury evoked discussions of the relationship between his performance and his ongoing commercial endorsement. Overall, Nike's instant responses fit an expected story line for prosumers to make sense of Liu's Olympic controversy. At a theoretical level, the instantaneous and sharing characteristics of Weibo communication have two levels of meaning: the instantaneity refers to the physical speed, while the sharing refers to the interpretative speed. As this sports ritual showed, influential actors in Weibo rituals need to engage on both levels (Liu & Berkowitz, 2013a).

The study was later presented at the International Communication Association's 2013 regional conference at Shanghai, China and also published in the *International Journal of Sport Communication* (Liu & Berkowitz, 2013a). I was more confident that the conceptual framework could be executed by qualitative analysis. My next step was to apply the method to more cases.

### Online Observation

Participant observation is a commonly used technique in ethnography. Paechter (2013) also suggests a researcher become a member of observed sites without intervening in other members' interactions when doing e-ethnography study. Therefore, online observation is the second methodological technique in this study. In conventional participant observation, researchers need to first of all observe the physical environment, such as the surroundings and the location, of the field being studied (Angrosino, 2007). This process has not been discussed much in eEthnography studies, because there is not a concrete setting for virtual communication. In this study, I would like to give all potential readers a brief idea of the "landscape" of Sina Weibo.

Sina Weibo's URL is weibo.com. As I mentioned before, weibo is an umbrella term for Chinese microblogging sites. There are other weibo sites, such as Tencent Weibo, Sohu Weibo, and Fanfou Weibo. Sina is the one using weibo as its domain name. This also indicates that Sina Weibo is the most influential Chinese microblogging site and justifies why I chose it as the study object. To create a Sina Weibo account, besides basic information – such as handle name, email address, and password – which regular social media would ask for, users also need to provide their identity card number. This number is associated with the house registration system and can be traced by police. In

the previous chapter, I have mentioned how to apply for a verified Sina Weibo account (p.17).

A Sina Weibo user's homepage looks similar to Twitter's. On the top is the feed input box. Each feed can be up to 140 Chinese characters and can include emoticons, pictures, videos, and hyperlinks. It is very important to point out that each Chinese character can be a word. Therefore, 140 characters in Chinese can be a short paragraph with far more information than one *Tweet* with 140 English characters (Beattie, 2012). Additionally, Sina Weibo has a function called "Chang Weibo" (literal meaning: long Weibo), which can convert text into image format. Therefore, if a user wants to post text longer than 140 characters in one feed, they can use this function. In other words, a microblogging feed can also be as long as a blog entry on Sina Weibo. For each posted Weibo feed, the number of reposts and the number of comments correspondently display on the feed's lower right corner. By clicking the number, others can read reposts and comments. Visual elements, such as emoticons, pictures, and videos, are also important components on Weibo. Scholars have observed that because in Eastern cultures, communication is highly contextualized, there are more entertaining visuals, animated illustrations and multimedia elements than on Western-based websites, where informational content is designed in a plain and simple chronological order with fewer visuals (Hermeking, 2005). Therefore, those visual elements were also included in my later analysis.

A user's homepage displays daily trending topics, popular third-party applications, the total number of the pages which the user "follows", the user's own "followers," and posted feeds. In addition, Sina Weibo does not have connecting requests functions. This



means that users have little controls of their content privacy. Anyone can check anyone else's homepage. It is noticeable that there are several advertising banners on a user's homepage, including popular books, movies, books and tourist attractions. Particularly, popular products from taobao.com are displayed in sidebars. Taobao is the largest e-commerce website in Asia. It is the equivalent of eBay in China. Its parent company Alibaba is one of the biggest B2B sites in the world and has the second-highest amount of Sina Weibo's stock since April 30, 2013 (Sina Weibo Wikipedia, n.d.). As I mentioned earlier, 60% of online activity in China is shopping. The largest Chinese e-commerce site is partnered with Sina Weibo. This background makes it even more vital to explore consumerist values on Sina Weibo.

My experience of data collection in the pilot study showed difficulties in crawling Weibo feeds of a past issue, but I also learnt that it was feasible to collect real-time data. Sina Weibo lists trending topics on all users' homepages. For each topic, a summary page is created that shows the timeline, significant persons' Weibo handles and key feeds that receive the most reposts and comments. Therefore, a summary page basically provides me with relevant information to closely study a trending topic.

The two-month observation started on March 1 and ended on April 30, 2013. I created two accounts on Sina Weibo with different profile information to avoid the trending topic list being customized. Every day, I compared the topic list shown on both accounts and found that the top five topics were basically the same for both accounts. I also checked major online and offline media and found that other media also discussed the daily top five Weibo trends. Then among every day's top five topics, I further narrowed to cases that fit the following criteria: (a) the topic involved consumption

behaviors or brand choices with cultural meanings; and (b) it stayed on the trending list for at least for two days. During the two months, there were 14 topics that matched the selection criteria (Table 1). After a brief review of all 14 topics, I selected three representative topics for further analysis. These cases were prominent high-profile social issues at the time and covered cultural themes in other cases. Also, they represented three types of consumerist issues. The first involved with a purchasing behavior. The second included a specific brand. The third was an unexpected disaster followed by quasi-consumption behaviors.

Table 1. The List of 14 Observed Trending Topics.

Topics
1. Hong Kong imposed a restriction on baby formula taken by individuals from Hong Kong to Mainland China.
2. Central China Television's Consumer Rights Day program criticized Apple for discriminating Chinese consumers.
3. Non-governmental donation calls after Ya'an Earthquake.
4. The Ministry of Railways was dismantled. The China Railway Corporation was established to carry out the previous Railways Ministry's commercial functions.
5. United Nations' report on middle class led to discussion on defining middle-class in China.
6. The Party's anti-corruption program resulted in a tremendous decreasing in the liquor market.
7. Annual sessions of National People's Congress and Chinese People's Consultative Conference held, covering livelihood issues.
8. Feng Xiaogang, a famous movie director criticized online slang as indecent.
9. Volkswagen responded to Central China Television's exposures on hidden dangers of its auto models.
10. A flame war between X generation and Y generation, followed by commercials of video games.
11. WeChat and other instant messenger apps may not be free to customers any more.
12. Ministry of Health suggested using traditional Chinese medicine to prevent H1N7.
13. Unchained Django released in China.
14. Fenghuang Ancient Town started charging entrance ticket to tourists.

The first case started on March 1. Hong Kong's government announced a restriction imposing a two-can limit on baby formula taken by individuals from Hong Kong to Mainland China. Violators might face a maximum two-year jail term and be fined 500,000 Hong Kong Dollars (about 64,477 USD) (BBC, 2013). Obviously, the topic involved consumption behavior: purchases of baby milk formula. It also indicated cultural meanings of the relationship between Hong Kong and Mainland China. Since the discussion trended on Weibo from midnight on March 1 to March 4, I chose this topic for further analysis.

The second case happened on March 15, which is Consumer Rights Day in China. Every March 15, Central China Television – the State run media – broadcasts an annual program to expose issues that infringe on consumers' rights. On the 2013 program, several international top brands, such as Apple, Volkswagen, Nestle, Kraft, and Android, were involved. The tech giant Apple was criticized for discriminative provisions such as shorter warranty periods compared with that of other countries, using refurbished parts for repair and averting after-sale obligations (Burkitt, 2013). While the program was on the air in that evening, CCTV synchronized broadcasting on its Sina Weibo account. Meanwhile, celebrities joined the case. Peter Ho, a popular Taiwanese star, posted at 8:26 pm:

How does Apple dare to play all these tricks on consumers? As an Apple fan I'm deeply hurt. Would this be worthy of Steve Jobs? Or to those young people who sold their kidneys [to pay for Apple products]? Sure enough, big corporations take advantage of their customers. Publish at around 8:20.

Users immediately found that other celebrities following CCTV's agenda all posted similar feeds that attacked Apple around the same time. Ho's post was deleted

very soon but users had taken screenshots and used them for further discussion. Later, Ho posted,

Now it's me, Peter Ho. Someone hacked my Weibo account and sent the above message! Who can tell me what's going on! This is ridiculous!

The incident evoked intense discussions, even though Apple does not run accounts on any Chinese social media sites and has never directly responded to a Weibo discussion. On April 1, 2013, Apple China posted a letter from Tim Cook on its official website responding to CCTV's criticism. This trending topic involved a specific brand and the whole issue involved dramatic changes because of Weibo, so it was also chosen for further analysis.

The third case was about donations after a major earthquake. On April 20, 2013, a 7.0-magnitude earthquake occurred in Lushan County, Ya'an, Sichuan Province, and 1.5 million people were affected by the earthquake. The disaster paused other on-going social issues and immediately became the top topic on Weibo. My focus was private charities' donation campaigns on Sina Weibo. This phenomenon was different from past disasters, after which state-affiliated charities such as the Red Cross Society of China were usually the main channels for donations. Private charities are associated with the neo-liberal idea that government should withdraw from social lives (Kings, 2006). Also, it is a common practice to package charities with consumption. Donations for this earthquake relief were not exceptional. Therefore, this issue was further studied as the third social ritual.

For each case, I took a screenshot of its summary page at least twice a day. After the data were collected, I conducted analysis by identifying cultural aspects, key values and general storylines (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Fairclough, 1995; Saldana, 2009; Schröder, 2002). Also, I took note of persons involved by analyzing their profile information. In

this way, I had an idea of who those prosumers are. Conceptually, these key prosumers were the agents in those rituals. In addition, I compared consumerist values that emerged in these three events to have a more comprehensive understanding of doxa on Weibo.

Because online interaction is widely based on unstated cultural backgrounds that require insiders' further clarification, the third section of my e-Ethnography study was face-to-face in-depth interviews.

### In-depth Interviews

Interview is another widely used technique in ethnography to clarify contradictions and to ask for more details and opinions (Angrosino, 2007). As I mentioned earlier, because it was very inefficient and ineffective to get large quantities of Weibo feeds, I could only collect the most commented on and reposted feeds on the summary page of each trending topic. As a result, I was unable to understand more prosumers' points of view. In-depth interviews with Weibo experts can compensate for this weakness and achieve data triangulation.

I conducted face-to-face interviews with 34 Weibo users in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou – the three strongholds of Mainland China's commercial creative industry and Weibo users. In qualitative research, 20 to 60 cases are acceptable to reach data saturation and variability, and the 34 interviews in this study met the criteria (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006; Morgan, Fischhoff, Bostrom & Atman, 2002). Although my field of study is online culture, I did face-to-face interviews for several reasons. As scholars have mentioned, technology-mediated interviews are constrained by accessibility and quality of communication technology. Conversations may be interrupted by connection problems (Kazmer & Xie, 2008; Murthy, 2008;

Opdenakker, 2006). Also, community members without high-quality equipment may be excluded from the study. Moreover, by doing face-to-face interviewing, researchers can compare differences between participants' online and offline communication, so that they can have a better understanding of the characteristics of online culture. Likewise, interpersonal communication may enhance participants' trust and thus the research's validity.

I used both purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants (Patton, 2001). All the interviewees are working in media, advertising or public relations industries. To do purposive sampling, I included participants from the following categories: (1) creative professionals who have been involved in brand campaigns on Weibo; (2) professionals who are in charge of Weibo releases in media outlets; (3) popular Weibo users with a large number of followers; (4) common users who primarily use Weibo to communicate with people in their existing networks; (5) non-users whose significant friends, family members and co-workers are active users. The creative professionals provided opinions of consumerist culture from the production perspective. The media professionals provided more understanding of the connection and diversity between conventional media and social media. Popular users provided opinions of consumerist culture from crucial agents' points of view. Common users provided opinions of prosumers' autonomy on Weibo. Non-users provided comparative opinions of Weibo communication. To do snowball sampling, I first recruited several participants with the informants' help and then asked the participants to introduce more interviewees. I used my personal Weibo account, which displays my name and affiliated institution on the profile, to contact participants.

I spent three weeks in July 2013 in Shanghai, then two weeks in August in Guangzhou, and three weeks in September in Beijing. In total, I interviewed 13 participants in Shanghai, 11 in Guangzhou and 10 in Beijing. The interviews were in Chinese and recorded with participants' permission, except that one participant refused to be recorded so only notes were taken. Among all 34 participants, 20 were male and 14 were female; 23 have college or equivalent degrees, one has a high school education, and the rest have master's degrees. The most experienced professionals have been in the creative industry for 18 years, while the youngest has been in the industry for one year. On average, the interviewees have six years of work experience, which allowed them to give me very solid and insightful opinions.

After each day's interviews, I immediately transcribed them and conducted a rough analysis to identify emerging themes. After more interviews finished, several themes appeared repeatedly. I consistently took memos (Saldana, 2011) when I realized a theme emerging. When few new themes emerged, I stopped my interviews (with the 34<sup>th</sup> interviewee), as data saturation was achieved. Then I started a second-round analysis to further identify common themes, and finally compared these findings with findings from the previous sections to reach conclusions. Also, I occasionally discussed my memos with the informants, who tried to challenge my rough findings and helped me improve the logic of my conclusions. In this way, I was able to use the multiple data to construct a hermeneutic circle which provided a conceptual explanation of Weibo as a ritual space (Debessay et al, 2008).

### Self Reflection

The power relation between research and participant is an important ethical concern in studies with human subjects. It turned out that snowball sampling is a recruiting strategy suitable in the Chinese social culture. In a collective society like China, networking is largely based on strong ties (Luo, 2011). When I was introduced to the participants by their friends or colleagues, they treated the interview as doing a favor for a friend's friend. I was more like a friend than a researcher to them. They were all very nice to me and very patient as I clarified my questions. Moreover, most of the interviews were scheduled during lunchtime, so I often had lunch with the participants before doing interviews. This process gave me opportunities to break the ice. As a Chinese woman, I understand that having meals together is one of the most common and important practices to establish networks. By sharing backgrounds, personal anecdotes or opinions about recent news, the participants and I had a chance to better know each other. I was able to better control the conversational rhythm and flow during the formal interviews.

My experience as a doctoral student in the U.S. also played an interesting role in my interaction with the participants. A doctoral degree in the U.S. is seen as prestigious in Chinese society. This can also be evidenced by the fact that the number of Chinese students in the U.S. has been approaching 200,000 (Zhao, 2013). Several interviewees expressed compliments about my ability to pursue a degree in the U.S. In addition, some felt honored to be part of a dissertation study. Also, the process such as reading the consent letter, asking for permission to record, and having a printed questions list seemed professional to them and reinforced their perception of the high quality of American education. It also strengthened their trust of the study. Additionally, several participants



expressed their surprise that my personality is different from the stereotype of female scholars in Chinese society, in a positive way. For them, I looked young, easy to communicate with, and down to earth, in contrast to the stereotype that female scholars are unsociable. They were curious about PhD programs in the U.S. and asked me some questions about this. This also gave me chances to break the ice.

Meanwhile, since I have stayed outside of China for more than five years, the participants treated me as an outsider of the society. When explaining their opinions, they were very detailed about context in case I was not familiar with the larger background. Also, they were very patient when I asked follow-up questions for more explanations. Particularly, those with long-term experience in industry were very willing to share their thoughts, since I am a student with limited industrial experience. Another unexpected experience during the interviews was about the weather. July 2013 happened to be the hottest July in Shanghai since the 1930s. Most of my interviews were scheduled during the participants' lunch breaks, so I was exposed to the over 110 °F heat every day. I looked very sweaty when I met the participants. Some of them were very touched, because it made me look very serious about the project and very hard-working. They were more willing to help with the study. In general, the participants were very cooperative during the research. They were engaging as they answered questions and offered help. All the interviews went smoothly. I even made many friends because of this experience. The uneven power relation between researcher and participants did not seem to have a major impact on this study.

## CHAPTER V

### CASE 1 “BABY IS HERE; MILK IS THERE”:

#### GLOBAL CONSUMERS VERSUS CHINESE CITIZENS

This chapter presents the trending topic of Hong Kong placing restrictions on baby milk formula taken by individuals to Mainland China. I reviewed the timeline of Weibo discussions and analyzed themes reflected in popular feeds shown on the summary page. Findings from the interview section were also covered to further explain this issue.

The Hong Kong government announced a restriction imposing a two-can limit on baby formula taken by individuals from Hong Kong to Mainland China. Violators could face a maximum two-year jail term and a fine of 500,000 Hong Kong Dollars (about 64,477 USD). The restriction has been in effect since March 1, 2013. On the first day, ten violators were arrested. Among them, eight were Hong Kong residents and the other two were from Mainland China (BBC, 2013). Some background explanation is needed. Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). It is under the sovereignty of PRC, but enjoys a high degree of autonomy and executive, legislative and independent judicial power. Mainland residents need to apply for special permits to visit Hong Kong. As an international financial center, Hong Kong’s economy is well known for low taxation and free trade. Thus, many Mainland residents visit Hong Kong as a shopping destination. Since the Sanlu poisoned milk scandal broke out in 2008 (Ramzy & Yang, 2008), large amounts of infant formula have been smuggled out of Hong Kong into Mainland China. Because there is no local milk production industry in Hong Kong, all formula in the Hong Kong market is imported. The

Mainlanders' demands for formula led to a severe infant formula shortage in Hong Kong. As the public complaints over the shortage rose, the SAR government decided to step in.

The first Weibo feed about the restriction was posted by Zuoyeben at 1:52 a.m. on March 2, at least six hours ahead of any media posting of the issue on Weibo. Zuoyeben is a popular Weibo user with more than 7 million followers. He is not a verified Weibo user and does not disclose any personal information on his profile. His Weibo handle "zuoyeben" literally means notebook for homework. He was reported to be a screenwriter. His Weibo account was suspended several times for progressive comments about the state's policies. His feed read,

The Hong Kong Government might change the restriction from "those exiting with two cans of milk formula may face two years in jail" to "those exiting with 'Two Breasts' should face two years in jail." In this way, our country will at least achieve a 10-year progress.

Without further explanation, this feed may make little sense. "Two Breasts" is the Internet jargon referring to mistresses of government officers. In this jargon, "breast" is pronounced the same as "milk." Therefore, this feed did not focus on the milk formula restriction but was satirically critical of corrupt officials who spend money without limitation on shopping in Hong Kong for their mistresses. The last sentence pointed out that those government officials were the reason hindering the nation's further development. Within ten hours, Zuoyeben's feed received more than 18,810 reposts and 2,771 comments. In total more than a million feeds on Sina Weibo related to this topic. In two days, 29 popular feeds were displayed on the topic's summary page. Among them, five feeds were from the media's Weibo and the rest were from individuals' Weibo accounts.

Three themes were found after textual analysis of the 29 popular feeds. In general, the topic was about a crisis – a shortage of infant formula. The first theme described the crisis from a political perspective; the second theme discussed it from an economic perspective; and the third theme addressed it from a cultural perspective.

### Government's Misconduct: Mainland Citizens' Frustration

This first theme mainly focused on criticizing the Mainland Chinese government's role in the issue. Hong Kong's formula shortage was caused by the low quality of Mainland China's products, which, in turn, was due to the government's neglect of its duty. It was surprising to notice that such a point of view was proposed by three major state-owned media outlets – People's Daily, CCTV News and Xinhua – on their Weibo accounts. For instance, Xinhua Opinion's feed read,

[Xinhua Micro-Opinion] Many netizens are mad at Hong Kong's milk powder restriction. We should face the root of this problem: Governmental fiscal revenue increases rapidly every year, but why are we not able to produce one can of milk powder of fine quality? Has the milk industry learnt the lesson from the San Lu scandal? Have the departments of quality supervision done their duties?

People's Daily's feed expressed a similar opinion:

[The Chinese milk industry should feel shame about the restriction] As the world's second largest economic entity, we can build space shuttles and aircraft carriers, but cannot produce infant formula that satisfies mothers in our country. We need to figure out why. It is the supervision departments' misconduct that has sacrificed domestic food safety. Faultiness of the supervision system leads to Chinese people's distrust of food safety and pushes consumers to the overseas market.

In both feeds, the lack of governmental supervision was discussed as the main cause of the crisis. The milk industry's failure was in contrast to the nation's success in scientific and military areas. In other words, these feeds implied that if more governmental

supervision could be imposed on the domestic milk industry, crises would be averted as they are in other areas.

Public intellectuals also linked the discrediting of the milk industry with governmental neglect, but their criticisms were much more harsh and their target was the entire political system. Murongxuecun, a progressive liberal writer whose Weibo account was suspended while I was writing this dissertation, posted,

...As the world's second economic entity, a rising nation, a nation that has hundreds of billions of misused public funds every year and a nation that spends hundreds of billions for regime sustainment, why cannot we produce one can of qualified milk powder? The San Lu scandal has been past for such a long time. Has the milk industry made any progress? What have the supervision departments been doing? What has the government been doing? Do deputies to the People's Congress or committee members of the Political Consultative Conference care about this?

This feed received more than 31,500 reposts and 5,800 comments within eight hours, which was 30 times more than the amount Xinhua's feed received. In this feed, the crisis was contrasted with the background of governmental corruption and human rights infringement. Murongxuecun directly attacked the political system that should be responsible for the milk industry's failure. In other words, the political system was the cause of the crisis. This regime's economic success did not necessarily transfer to its responsibility to the people. This notion was also reflected in another liberal figure's feed. Xuemanzi, who used to be on the list of the Top 10 most popular Weibo users and was later arrested for prostitution, posted on his Weibo,

... A nation that claims to have the second largest GDP in the world is not able to have its people consuming acceptable milk... Such a high price to pay for a GDP is pointless... Don't you agree?

This feed received similar numbers of reposts and comments as did Murongxuecun's.

Again, the milk industry's failure was constructed to discredit the state's economic success.

Wangwei, whose verified account shows him as a celebrity in the financial industry with more than 2 million followers, compared Hong Kong's political system with that of Mainland China in his feed. He wrote,

Hong Kong's restriction showed how the governor was powerless to manipulate public opinions. In contrast, the public in Mainland China had no solutions to deal with poor-quality goods produced by state-owned corporations that monopolize the oil, telecommunication and media industries. Also, we are powerless to fight with the milk industry that was controlled by different interest groups.

Similar to Zuoyeben's feed, Wangwei situated the milk industry crisis within a background of governmental misconduct. Zuoyeben associated the crisis with individual officials' private lives, which were irrelevant to the milk industry. Wangwei connected the crisis with state monopolization, even though the Chinese milk industry is not monopolized by the state. Both feeds used the collective memory of the state's political and economic problems to construct the story of the milk formula crisis.

Besides these serious discussions, political satire was also disseminated. For instance, Libingbing, the movie star with about 25 million fans, forwarded one on her Weibo:

#Joke with Hong Kong's formula restriction# If you are pregnant, turn yourself in with three cans of baby formula when you exit the Hong Kong border. You will not have enough money for the fine, so you will only face the two-year jail sentence, where you would make arrangements for your board and lodging. You would not be poisoned by air pollution. When your baby is born, he or she would immediately become a Hong Kong citizen, whose milk formula would be provided by social security. After the two-year jail sentence, you would get back to Mainland China. When your child is 18, you could apply to be a Hong Kong resident. The whole family would live happily.

In this piece, instead of commenting on the restriction, the focus was to emphasize or to exaggerate advantages of life in Hong Kong: better benefits, better social security, and better air quality. It implied the dissatisfaction felt by Mainland China citizens.

Therefore, the state-owned media, liberal intellectuals, popular celebrities and business figures offered different versions to explain the crisis, although they all focused on the political perspectives, and the previous poisoned-milk scandal was repeatedly used as a reference. The state-owned media argued that there should be more government intervention in the market, and the others believed Mainland China's political system to be the root of the crisis.

#### Outreaching Global Markets: Dissatisfaction as Consumers

The second theme of the discussion from the economic perspective debated the legitimacy of the restriction. The focus was on the Hong Kong market as the connection for Mainland Chinese consumers to reach the global market.

For instance, Wangshuo, a veteran financial journalist with more than 140,000 followers, posted,

...The formula shortage in Hong Kong should just be temporary and will be assuaged soon when global milk corporations revalue the Hong Kong market's demands. Hong Kong's vitality is from being the bridge between China and the world. It is absurd for the Hong Kong government to place obstacles (on this bridge) in this issue...

His point of view was also echoed by Yuanli, the chief editor of the Wall Street Journal's Chinese Edition. She commented on Weibo that the Mainland government should lower or even exempt tax for imported baby formula. In other words, Hong Kong was the connection between the constrained Mainland market and the free global market. Since

this connection was cut off by the new regulation, the solution to solve this crisis was to release the constraints on the Mainland market and to directly embrace the global market.

Besides the macro-level debate, micro-level strategies were also proposed.

Yangyue, a radio station DJ, posted a thousand-word Chang Weibo, titled “Imported milk powder raiders.” In this piece, he specified the details of choosing imported milk powder, including country of origin, taste, purchasing channels and price. The post began with,

Why are there so many people praising Hong Kong’s trade protectionism in the name of democracy? In such a case, let us talk about something more realistic...

In the purchasing channel section, he recommended that consumers find reliable overseas shops on eBay-like taobao.com. Those online shops would buy baby formula on customers’ behalf. In this way, even though the Hong Kong market is not open to individual consumers in Mainland China, consumers could still purchase milk powder from the global market via e-commerce channels. As Yangyue summarized in his post,

It is pointless to fight against Hong Kong’s restriction. It is more realistic to find a reliable taobao shop... Here are my overall suggestions:

1. As long as it is affordable, you had better choose foreign-brand formulas
2. Do more research about baby formula online
3. Try your best to buy formula overseas
4. Even if you might run into online fraud, do not completely lose faith in e-commerce channels
5. Try to choose the international brands that I recommended...

Based on this feed, e-commerce can be seen as an effective strategy for individual consumers to break away from governmental trade protection. This idea to gain free



choices in the global market via the Internet perfectly fits with the neo-liberal ideology that government is the problem and technology is the solution.

Additionally, some popular users debated whether Hong Kong's economy has benefited from sharing markets with Mainland China. For instance, Gaoshuqun, a movie director with more than three million followers, complained,

Hong Kong believes that the milk formula shortage is due to too many Mainland demands. If such logic makes any sense, here is another example: Hong Kong's movie market is shrinking, so that many professionals in the industry have come to Mainland to seek their fortunes. As a result, many Mainland professionals have lost their jobs. Should Mainland also have similar regulations to limit coordination between movie professionals from Hong Kong and from Mainland? No, we have not and will never do this.

The director's argument was that Mainland China was supporting Hong Kong's movie industry. In return, Hong Kong should not hesitate to support Mainland China's formula demands. A shared market was the reason for Hong Kong and Mainland China to cooperate.

In contrast, some popular users rejected the analogy of formula trade with other trade activities. For instance, Liaoweitang, a Hong Kong writer, wrote a Chang Weibo post to refute notions that Hong Kong received trade benefits from Mainland China:

Hong Kong is a free trade port, which is supposed to benefit from baby formula trade...However, when supply cannot meet demand, neo-liberalism is pointless. Liberalism cannot produce endless formula...During the Asian Financial Crisis, Hong Kong used our own foreign exchange reserves [not from Mainland]... Fresh water from Mainland is sold to Hong Kong at a high price... High-quality vegetables and fruits exported to Hong Kong are not special supplements but should meet Hong Kong's high standards of food quality... Do not assume money is all-powerful. Even if I share my ration with you, that is for the sake of goodness not for your money. We would completely support compatriot citizens in Mainland, if you demand your own government to strengthen its supervision of the milk industry, or to import more baby formula from the global market.

In this post, the writer argued that Hong Kong and Mainland China were not sharing economic benefits. Baby formula exported from Hong Kong to Mainland China was defined as a ration necessary for life instead of merchandise. In contrast, fresh water, vegetables and fruits exported from Mainland China to Hong Kong were defined as merchandise instead of rations necessary for life. He posited that only Mainland China benefited from sharing Hong Kong's market. Moreover, the post indicated a complicated attitude toward the global market and neo-liberalism. On the one hand, the user seemed to support the Hong Kong government's intervention to protect local demands, and criticized neo-liberalism. On the other hand, he also supported Mainland China's embrace of more of the global formula market. (It is important to note that my point is not to judge which argument was legitimate. My point is to show how different narratives can be constructed based on the same product, the same purchasing behavior, and the same societal crisis.) Actually, although the Mainland director and the Hong Kong writer hold opposite points of view in this debate, they essentially share a similar underlying presumption that shared economic benefits are the foundational reason for these two territories to cooperate.

In general, from the economic perspective, users were debating Hong Kong's role in relation to the Mainland market and the global market. Interestingly, regardless of whether the users agreed with the Hong Kong government's intervention, they all indicated a notion that Mainland China should be more open to the global market. Some argued to keep the Hong Kong connection. Some suggested resources and strategies for individual consumers to break from governmental trade protection. Finally, some supported more pressure on the Mainland government.

“As Compatriot”; “As Chinese”

In the third theme, baby formula was not only associated with national pride but also seen to connect Hong Kong and Mainland China as compatriots. The crisis of formula purchasing essentially became the crisis of the Chinese people. The ending of Xinhua’s feed stated: “Chinese babies have to be fed by others’ milk! What a shame!” Similarly, Liuchun, a famous media professional with more than 2 million followers, questioned: “In such a big country, how cannot such a small problem be solved?” In both feeds, the crisis was raised to a national level. It was about national pride. Baby formula was not a product, but the milk that fed the next Chinese generation. It was shameful that such milk was produced outside China, and both feeds implied that babies who were fed by imported milk were not pure “Chinese babies.” Such a small problem should not exist in such a big country. Therefore, the unpopularity of domestic formula in Mainland China diminished national dignity.

Additionally, the restriction raised debates about the Chinese identity of Hong Kong and Mainland China. Panshiyi, a real estate mogul with more than 16 million followers, complained on his Weibo: “When Mainland babies are starving, our Hong Kong compatriots should even give us some milk formula as gifts...” LeeKaifu, the previous CEO of Google China with more than 51 million followers, also mentioned that the restriction incited disharmony between Hong Kong and Mainland China, and argued for criticism of the regulation instead of the people. Yaochen, a movie star and the most popular Weibo user with more than 58 million followers, forwarded on her Weibo,

Today’s saddest quote – The furthest distance in the world is when baby is in arms, but milk formula is on the other side of the Bay.  
(in tears)[emoticon].

Along with the text, a picture of a crying baby was attached in this Weibo feed. “The other side of the Bay” referred to Hong Kong Island, which is separated from Mainland China by Shenzhen Bay. Individual users like Yaochen, LeeKaifu, Panshiyi, and Liuchun, who are celebrities in their professional areas, having verified Weibo accounts with millions of followers, are called “Big V.” Particularly, Yaochen and LeeKaifu are the most influential users on Sina Weibo. Their opinions can immediately be seen by millions of people.

From a cultural perspective, discussions of formula powder skirted the boundary of Chinese identity issues by implying that formula imported from “others” was inauthentic for Chinese to consume and stating that the problems with domestic formula hurt national pride. Milk formula trade between Hong Kong and Mainland symbolized mutual aid among compatriots. The restriction was not simply a political crisis that the Mainland government needed to take seriously, or an economic crisis concerning free trade, but a cultural crisis that hurt the familial harmony between Hong Kong and Mainland China. Milk formula was not only a product that should be freely traded, but also should be a gift between compatriots to help pull through difficulties.

Textual analysis of those popular feeds generated emerging themes of this trending topic from political, economic and cultural perspectives. However, textual analysis has limited interpretive power to reveal deeper reasons why this restriction became a trending topic. This limitation was compensated by the in-depth interviews.

#### Failure to Sustain Livelihood and Identity Struggles

The baby formula case happened in March 2013. My interviews began in July and continued through September. Though almost half a year had passed, all the participants

remembered the case very well. When I asked their opinions about why this case evoked discussions on Weibo, their answers in general fell into two categories. For one thing, baby formula was not simply merchandise but was related to the on-going food safety concerns. For another thing, the case resonated with the on-going conflict between Hong Kong and Mainland China after sovereignty of Hong Kong was transferred to China from the UK in 1997. In general, even though the current restrictions were initiated by Hong Kong, they could still be traced to previous memories to justify why they preferred imported formula and to reinforce their frustration about the government and about the system.

### A Livelihood Issue

As shown in the online observation section, the previous poisoned milk formula scandal was repeatedly referenced to discuss why Mainland consumers preferred imported formula. When the interviewees explained this trending topic, they also referred to other “poisoned” substances – such as food, oil, or even air – all of which were identified as livelihood issues.

For instance, when I asked what kind of issues could easily become trending topics on Weibo, CW, a creative director in Guangzhou with more than 12 years of professional experience, said,

The biggest [issues on Weibo], I guess, are relevant to livelihood, because everyone cares about it. For instance, food safety or air pollution can evoke great resonance.

CHZ, a social media manager in Shanghai, further explained why the restriction became trending,

Because everyone is so concerned about infant formula... In the Chinese market, we have done a lot of [campaigns] for infant

products such as milk formula. [We find that] the attention to this is really high. There were previous problems with infant formula, so this issue gets really close attention. Chinese parents are really concerned about their kids' health. Food safety issues have been of great concern so many times. Therefore, when the restriction news broke out on Weibo, immediately people got angry. That was not surprising.

Answering what people were angry about and whom they were angry at, YP, who has been working in the digital advertising industry for more than six years, said,

Food safety and living quality have been big issues in China. They were supposed to be basic human needs, right? Such basic things should not become things to be discussed, right? Unfortunately, in China's system... Well, I believe, if similar (food safety) issues happened in the U.S., it would be a high-profile issue... however in China...

At first glance, YP's answer might not seem to directly answer the question. But YP's subtext can be understood when compared with AA's response. AA, the social media manager based in Guangzhou, directly pointed out that the public anger was against the government,

This issue [food safety] was mostly the government's responsibility. Well, part of it may be the industry's [responsibility], but essentially it's because of the government's lack of supervision... Two backgrounds: first, the poisoned milk destroyed consumers' trust. No one in the entire society trusts domestic-produced milk formulas any more. [Second,] after that, the government even let those problematic corporations decide the safety standards for the industry. Consumers then found those standards much lower than other countries' and realized that the government only tried to protect the domestic corporations' interests rather than the public interests.

Considering these four interviewees' opinions together, we can come to understand why public anger was directed toward the government. The previous poisoned formula scandal and other food safety issues served as the collective memory for Weibo users to judge the government's role in livelihood issues. In these previous issues, they were disappointed that the Mainland government did not execute their duty to defend their basic living needs, but instead served the domestic formula giants' desires.

Therefore, the issue became trending because it reinforced users' enduring frustration about the government and about the system. With this understanding, we can see that YP's real point was to compare the U.S. and China. She believed that such a food safety problem would be immediately solved in the American system, but has been ignored by the government in China's system.

The interviewees' opinions resonated with the political perspective which emerged from the popular perspective. Essentially, the repeated narratives showed the frustration of Mainland citizens, who did not trust the government or the political system to represent their interests. At first glance, consumers' preference for overseas milk formula may sound similar to Wei and Pan's (1999) findings 15 years ago that admiration of the West was a significant component in Chinese consumerist orientations. However, the previous study concluded that the admiration was related to conspicuous consumption. Western industrial countries have developed more sophisticated production techniques, resulting in a perception that the products are better quality. Such products also tend to have higher prices, and, for Chinese citizens, these characteristics of products imported from the West add to a perception that consumption of those goods shows off consumers' higher socio-economic status. However, as the milk formula case showed, consumption of overseas formula was less about showing off and more about meeting basic needs. Thus, in this case, admiration of the West was less about production techniques or prices and more about entire political economic systems. For instance, WX, a journalist with more than 140,000 Weibo followers, commented in the interview:

There have been a series of scandals of the domestic milk formula companies since 2008, but they have never admitted their problems...Because of such attitude and also because the government and the legal system did not effectively punish them, even if they indeed have improved since 2008, domestic

consumers still do not trust them. Such distrust led to many people turning to imported formula.

Therefore, it was the previous poisoned milk case that left consumers with a perception of the government's failure in supervising domestic milk markets. Such perception was repeated in the current milk formula crisis. WX further explained:

Then many Chinese consumers also believe that overseas formulas are even better than imported formulas. Regardless of whether it is true or not, the perception is that overseas formulas are the best, because consumers do not even trust the quality supervision system of imported formulas. Therefore, many consumers look for formulas from overseas markets... There are two levels of distrust. The first distrust is toward the domestic industry; the second – and the essential one – is toward the government or the legal system that was supposed to solve problems but failed to do that.

As WX pointed out, the distrust toward the domestic milk formula industry led consumers to turn to imported formulas. The huge demand for formula outside the Mainland market indicated that the real distrust was toward the Mainland governmental system. This point of view echoed YP's U.S.-versus-China comparison that the issue would be immediately solved in the U.S. but not in China. That also explained why it was that, despite the fact that the Hong Kong government announced the restriction, the criticism was mainly about the Mainland government.

### Identity Struggles

Identity conflict between people from Hong Kong and Mainland China was the second main reference that the interviewees mentioned to explain the formula restriction issue.

LL has been working in a social media firm in Guangzhou for a year. She is originally from Southeast China and received her Master's degree from a university in Hong Kong. When discussing the formula case, she explained that the divergence



between Hong Kong and Mainland China has already existed for a while. The formula restriction was not the first case. She mentioned a Hong Kong newspaper advertisement complaining about Mainlanders as “locusts” swarming into Hong Kong, as well as previous protests complaining about too many Mainland pregnant women taking away public resources in Hong Kong hospitals.

GF, a Guangzhou-based public relations professional, believed that Hong Kong and Mainland’s divergence was not a nationalist issue but a regional issue:

For example, there were two [hypothetical] villages. One village’s residents poured into the other for goods so that the other’s residents could not lead regular lives. Of course, people in the second village would be mad. Even if these two villages belong to the same county, the same city, and the same province, they might have a fight.

He then brought in the Cantonese language as another example to explain the Hong Kong-Mainland divergence. People speaking Cantonese were proud that UNESCO defined Cantonese as a language rather than a dialect. Non-Cantonese speakers cannot understand this kind of pride. He believed that the same divergence would also happen between Shanghainese speakers and non-speakers.

GF’s hypothetical example may seem irrelevant at first glance. However, it is important to point out that people from Guangzhou and Hong Kong both can speak Cantonese, which is dramatically different from Mandarin. There are hundreds of dialects in China. For example, people from Shanghai speak Shanghainese. After GF brought in this example, I realized that interviewees who can speak Cantonese in general defended Hong Kong. When they mentioned Mainlanders, they often used discourses such as “those Mainlanders” or “they,” even though Guangzhou is part of Mainland China. In contrast, non-Cantonese interviewees never used third-person pronouns when referring to

Mainlanders. For instance, LYS, a Guangzhounese fashion media editor, believed that Hong Kongers' complaints were due to Mainlanders' misbehaviors:

Many Mainlanders think that ... Hong Kong's thriving is due to its disreputable colonial history, and Hong Kong's economy now relies on Mainland's support, such as tourists' consumption...Those Mainlanders behave as if they can do anything with their money.

She also used the example of the locust advertisement that LL had mentioned and explained that the attack ad was because of a Mainland visitor's violation of Hong Kong's metro prohibition of drinking and eating. Uncivil behaviors like that incensed Hong Kong residents and evoked regionalist attacks. Based on these previous incidents, LYS saw the legitimacy of Hong Kong's milk formula restriction: "For sure, Hong Kong and Mainland consumers were unequally treated. However, such inequality was due to different political systems."

Hong Kong's governmental system has not dramatically changed since 1997 and is different from Mainland's authoritarian system. LYS' statement implied the perception of Mainland's system as failing to protect citizens' basic living needs as well as interfering in consumers' free choices and equal rights in the global market. This comment echoed the movie star, Libingbing's repost of the satire on the "benefits" of being jailed in Hong Kong. As LYS implied, Hong Kong's regional exceptionalism was both culturally and politically legitimate.

Interestingly, MS is a Shanghai-based creative professional, who disliked Hong Kong's restriction but also emphasized that the issue was more about regionalism:

[We] assume that Hong Kong is part of China. [As Chinese consumers], we should be able to buy as much stuff as they can [in China's territory]. However, Hong Kong has emphasized too much of its regional exceptionalism.

She believed if Hong Kong's regional exceptionalism was legitimate, Shanghai should also enjoy similar autonomy.

How about Shanghai ordering a similar purchasing restriction? I bet there would be even greater repercussions. [In Hong Kong's case,] great repercussions were because as part of China, Hong Kong enjoys so many privileges...based on what? Is there an end to such privileges? ... For example, because there is a Disney Land in Hong Kong, the Disney Land which is being constructed in Shanghai cannot be bigger than that one... Hong Kong enjoys so many benefits from sovereignty reverting to Mainland China but returns nothing to Mainland.

Similarly, JX, a Beijing-based social media enterpriser, joked about Hong Kong's regionalism as non-Chinese:

It is a discrimination issue. [We] think that Hong Kong is part of China. [However,] what about the visa-equivalent permit for visiting there? And now those purchasing milk formula would be arrested? That is too unreasonable. Has Hong Kong become an independent nation?

HW was a Beijing-based news media corporation's strategy manager who also received a Master's from a university in Hong Kong and has been in the industry for more than eight years. HW summarized: "Hong Kongers hold prejudices against Mainlanders, while Mainlanders also hold prejudices against Hong Kongers."

Interviewees' divergent opinions showed that the identity of "Chinese" is an on-going myth in the society. The divergence between Hong Kongers and Mainlanders involves political, economic and cultural reasons. Politically, Hong Kong enjoys autonomy as SAR. Culturally, the Cantonese language is a barrier and the colonial history is also not shared by Mainland China. As a result, economic exchanges between Hong Kong and Mainland China became a central connection to assuage the political and cultural gaps. This phenomenon is not unique in issues related to Hong Kong. Tang and He's (2010) study on Chinese ethnic minorities includes similar findings. Laws and regulations entitle ethnic minorities to all kinds of political and economic benefits and

privileges, such as exceptions to the One Child Policy and entitled lower taxes. Ethnic languages are taught and used as official languages in ethnically autonomous regions. However, these benefits actually set differences between ethnic minorities and the Han group. Both emphasize the privileges that the others enjoy and believe themselves to be discriminated against. All these issues demonstrate an identity construction process of “Chinese.” The regional exceptionalism in this case was essentially a manifestation of the nationalist identity’s boundary negotiation. The consumption restriction repeated the ongoing mythical narrative of nationalist construction, which caused it to rise to the nationalist discussions on social media.

#### Citizen, Consumer and Chinese

This entire dissertation aims to explain (a) “trendingworthy” values on Weibo, (b) the society’s enduring cultural significance expressed through consumerist rituals and (c) crucial agents in the Weibo field. The following section addresses these three points based on online observations and interviews focusing on this milk formula restriction case.

Based on popular feeds collected from online observation and opinions emerging from interviews, dissatisfaction with the Mainland government was found to be an important element in this trending topic. The first feed that initiated the discussion was almost irrelevant to the specific issue, but played word games by associating “two cans of milk” with “Two Breasts” to mock government officers’ immoral lives. Discontent with the government quickly resonated with users on Weibo, which caused them to pay attention to the issue. The Mainland government was blamed for not effectively punishing or supervising the domestic milk formula industry after a series of poisoned-

milk scandals. The government's failure to ensure food safety and control air pollution was referenced as collective memory to criticize its role in the milk formula issues. Even the state media joined in the criticism and demanded that supervision departments fulfill their duties.

However, the state media's criticism was in regards to a small part of the governmental system. In contrast, Weibo users' criticisms targeted the broader political system. Some popular users accused the People's Congress deputies of dereliction of duty. Some attacked the government's over-spending on regime sustainability. Firstly, the milk formula issue exposed governmental inefficiency in sustaining basic living needs for citizens. Secondly, when Mainland consumers lost confidence in the domestic milk formula industry, they turned to the international market, but Mainland's trade protections further limited their freedom of choice as consumers. Thirdly, the disappointment of Mainland's political economic system led to admiration of liberal capitalist systems. Such admiration further enhanced the trust of foreign-produced formulas. This three-level dissatisfaction of government on Weibo was essentially a representation of neo-liberalist values.

This dissatisfaction resonated with neo-liberalist values as contextualized in Chinese nationalist discourses. The milk formula case presented a negotiation among society members' political identity (P.R.C citizen), economic identity (global consumers) and cultural identity (Chinese). The authoritarian government was perceived as the reason that its citizens cannot enjoy freedom of choice and equal rights in the global market. Hong Kong, as a free trade port, has become a tangible and convenient channel for Mainland consumers to embrace the global market – particularly through products from

liberal capitalist (Western) countries. Meanwhile, the Internet – specifically e-commerce sites – allowed individual consumers to break through the nation's trade protections. Discontent with their political identity pushed them to further accept their economic identity as consumers in the global market. Hong Kong's restriction reminded them that their limited choices and freedom as global consumers were originally because of their political identities. Also, Hong Kong's special political and economic status in China reinforced Mainlanders' dissatisfaction with their political identities. Therefore, to challenge the restriction's legitimacy, the nationalist identity was brought into the discussion to integrate Hong Kong and Mainland as both Chinese. Similarly, for those who defend the restriction's legitimacy, regional exceptionalism was emphasized to push the nationalist boundary further away. In general, the milk formula restriction case was a consumerist ritual that allowed users to balance their multiple roles in society and to negotiate the conflicts between neo-liberal values and nationalist values.

This case also showed neo-liberal elites' leading roles in Weibo rituals. A grass-roots popular user first beat the state media's timeliness. Big V accounts further competed with state-run media for interpretative speed. Those accounts consist of liberal public intellectuals, veteran journalists, celebrities and, noticeably, business tycoons. These business figures were engaged in offering opinions from different points of view which drew a large number of followers' comments and reposts. Their opinions were constructed based on the collective memory of the government's negative impacts on market competition. In other words, in this Weibo consumerist ritual, liberal figures and tycoons were significant agents. Since the interviews' findings in general echoed themes which emerged from popular feeds, it showed that those Big V accounts enjoyed higher-

level cultural capital and had a better idea of “the game rules” in the Weibo field. Their popularity indirectly indicated this field’s acknowledgement of individuals’ success and also showed the field’s value of neo-liberal values such as more freedom of choice and less governmental intervention in the global market.

The first case demonstrated three narratives – the criticism of government, the negotiation of identity conflicts, and the leadership of neo-liberal elites – discussed through a Weibo ritual. The next chapter shows how similar narratives repeat in Weibo-users’ reactions to a different issue.

## CHAPTER VI

### CASE 2 “PUBLISH AROUND 8:20”: APPLE FANS OR CHINESE?

In the second case, the state-run media had a “battle” with an international brand, and Weibo users debated their conflicting identities as a foreign brand’s consumers or as “Chinese.” Following the last chapter’s format, I will first review the timeline of the Weibo discussion, and then analyze themes reflected in popular feeds shown on the summary page. Findings from the interview section are also covered to further explain this issue.

Every March 15, the Central China Television (CCTV) – the largest state-run network – broadcasts an annual program to expose issues that infringe on consumers’ rights. The program is called the 3.15 Gala. In the 2013 program, several top international brands, such as Apple, Volkswagen, Nestle, Kraft, and Android, were involved. The tech giant Apple was criticized for discriminative practices, such as shorter warranty periods for Chinese citizens compared with those of other countries, using refurbished parts for repair, and evading after-sale obligations (Burkitt, 2013). While the program was on the air that evening, CCTV synchronized broadcasting on its Sina Weibo account. Meanwhile, several popular Weibo users posted criticisms of Apple. For example, Zhengyuanjie – a fiction writer with more than 5 million followers – wrote,

#315 in Action# Chinese consumers choose Apple, not only for the technology, but also for [the brand’s value of] solicitude, equality, love and care. [I am so shocked] to learned that Apple has double standards of after-sale services for Chinese consumers and consumers in developed countries. Paying the same or higher prices to purchase Apple products, Chinese consumers receive lower quality services than developed countries’ consumers. Hopefully what Apple misses [in its logo] is not conscience. What do you think?



As those critical feeds emerged and discussions continued, Peter Ho, a popular Taiwanese star, posted at 8:26 pm with,

How does Apple dare to play all these tricks on consumers? As an Apple fan, I'm deeply hurt. Would this be worthy of Steve Jobs? Or to those young people who sold their kidneys [to pay for Apple products]? Sure enough, big corporations take advantage of their customers. Publish at around 8:20.

Users immediately found that those celebrities agreeing with CCTV's criticism all posted their feeds on Weibo around the same time. At that point, the whole discussions' focus shifted. "Publish at around 8:20" then became Weibo jargon. Ho's post was deleted soon after. Later he posted,

Now it's me, Peter Ho. Someone hacked my Weibo account and sent the previous message! Who can tell me what's going on! This is ridiculous!

As a result, among all brands involved in this year's 3.15 program, Apple evoked the most intense discussions, even though Apple does not run accounts on any Chinese social media sites. #Apple# and #Apple After-sale Service# remained the top two hottest hash tags until March 18 – three days after the program. On March 30, a law professor from Renmin University of China criticized Apple during CCTV's interview:

I've noticed that Apple's logo is missing one piece. [I think] that missing piece is a grateful heart.

#Apple's logo# immediately appeared on that day's trending topic list. One day later, on April 1, Apple China posted a letter from Tim Cook on the official website responding to the whole issue. #Apple's Apology# became the top hash tag.

Between March 15 and 18, and on March 30 and April 1, 30 popular feeds commenting on this issue appeared on the summary page and were collected for analysis. Three themes were found. The first theme focused on exposing the shady dealings of the program. The second theme was criticism of state-run media and state-owned

monopolizing corporations and the government. The third theme addressed nationalist pride in this “battle.”

### Discovering CCTV’s Shady Deals

Although Peter Ho’s “publish around 8:20” feed was removed and he claimed that his account was hacked, Weibo users did not believe his explanation. Consequently, users pointed out Big V accounts that posted similar content about the same time and satirized their coordination with CCTV. For example, Xiaoyidadao, a media professional with about 600,000 followers, commented,

#Publish around 8:20# Don’t be afraid of god-like adversary but be aware of pig-like teammate. Peter Ho’s stupidity immediately betrayed his comrades such as Zhengyuanjie, Liujishou, Jiaoshouyixiaoxing, and Changxiaohui. By the way, Zhengyuanjie was the most punctual and posted at 8:20 sharp. Liujishou and Yixiaoxing were a little bit late and did not post till 8:21...#315 In Action#

The feed began with the #Publish around 8:20# tag and joked about those celebrity users as teammates and comrades. Also, it ended with the hash tag #315 in Action# –which was the same tag used by Zhengyuanjie—to follow CCTV’s program. Additionally, this feed included screenshots highlighting the fact that all the feeds criticizing Apple’s service were actually sent from the users’ iPhones, since Sina Weibo displays each feed’s client device. The text and the image together insinuated that those celebrities were hypocritical, and roasted the program’s credibility. Another media professional, Xianrenzhilu, also expressed similar opinions. His feed directly questioned whether there was a financial deal between Peter Ho and CCTV:

Well, this Peter Ho...CCTV’s 3.15 program tried so hard to be influential and sincerely invited you to assist them. It prepared the Weibo content for you and particularly reminded you to “publish around 8:20.” You can earn the money just by clicking your mouse, so easy! How could you not even take a look at the content,

since not doing so directly exposed CCTV's shady deal. In this case, should CCTV still pay you or not?

LeeKaifu, the previous CEO of Google China, posted,

[Do Big Vs charge for posting 3.15 feeds?] It was actually simple. CCTV invited some Big Vs on Sina Weibo to participate in some event by posting feeds at a certain time. That's all. There is no payment. I know it because the program invited me...

This feed clarified the suspicious deal between the program and those Big Vs. However, it was not helpful in repairing CCTV's credibility.

Zhuomoxiansheng, a famous writer with about 1.7 million followers, commented on his Weibo,

[The program] claimed to crack down on counterfeit goods but actually produced counterfeit opinions online... Brands that broadcasted advertisements during the program were "safe" [from being attacked.]

This feed criticized CCTV for manipulating online opinions and also took advantage of its influence to accumulate advertising revenue. Other popular feeds also disclosed the program's scandals, even though one popular feed showed that the program's director emphasized in an interview that every case presented in the program was supported by legitimate evidence. Since it is hard to check authenticity and factuality of those conspiracy-themed feeds, I decided not to specify them in detail. Also, in the interviews, many interviewees mentioned other conspiracy theories. I will discuss this later in this chapter. In general, in the first theme, the program and the television's reputation suffered intense attacks.

### The Issue of Freedom

In the second theme, discussions went beyond the accusations against Apple. Instead, the discussions quickly expanded to criticize the state-run media, the state-run monopolizing industries and the overall political system.

For instance, Zuoyeben, the popular user who initiated the milk formula discussions, posted his opinions about the 3.15 program:

The 3.15 program is far more disgusting than the brands that the program attacks. Apple at least has after-sale services. Was there anyone taking care of those babies poisoned by Sanlu milk formulas... Has the program dared to investigate the milk formula, or polluted water, or Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), or Sino Petroleum Corporation (Sinopec), or China Mobile? It has never investigated products related to people's livelihood but only found some scapegoats.

In this feed, Apple's after-sale services were contextualized within the background of previous scandals of poisoned formula and water pollution and the public's collective memory of poor services provided by state-owned monopolies. Such contrast made Apple's problem appear negligible. Echoing the milk formula case, people's livelihood was brought up as the real focus. Yinengjing, a popular Taiwanese star, implied a similar point of view in her feed:

Which one is more unpalatable, Apple or dead pig? Which one is more unmanageable, Apple or milk formula? Which one is dirtier, Apple or air? Apple is unclean, because of Apple's uncleanness or water's uncleanness? There is something called "wrong focus" in this world. Well, maybe the wrong focus is on purpose and things that really need focus then become outside the field of view.

The feed also included pictures of dead pigs found in Huangpu River. The background news was that five days before March 15, thousands of dead pigs were found in Huangpu River, which is the water supply for Shanghai City. The origin of those pigs had not been clarified by official sources. Shanghai's environmental protection office claimed that the water quality had not been affected (Wong, 2013). The collective memory of milk formula, air pollution and suspicious water quality was used as reference to relieve the focus on Apple. The last sentence of the feed implied that the TV program's focus on Apple was actually meant to divert the public attention away from livelihood issues.

LeeKaifu also mentioned livelihood issues when he explained why he did not accept CCTV's invitation to comment on Apple:

My answer was, "If the issue was an important one related to livelihood (air, water, food safety), I would love to offer my comments. Otherwise, let it pass..." Then, it indeed passed.

Ningcaishen, a famous soap opera director with more than 6 million followers, directly pointed out the political factors behind the TV program:

It is time to expose the 3.15 program's counterfeit. The program is completely a political show and has nothing about exposing counterfeit products. The program has dozens of liaisons, from the Industrial and Commercial Bureau, the Bureau of Quality Supervision, the Food and Drug Administration, to the Court and Procuratorate. Which of them has protected consumers' rights? The previous chief of the National Bureaus of Quality Supervision, Li Changjiang, is indeed the chief culprit of poisoned milk; the previous chief of National Pharmaceutical Administration, Zheng Xiaoyu, is in fact the chief culprit of counterfeit medicine.

These popular users raised their concerns that the TV program and the government partnered to manipulate public attention. They used the collective memory of the government's previous failure to address livelihood issues in order to discredit the state's representing consumers or protecting consumer rights. Even more, they criticized the government's silence in the issue of ensuring people's basic living needs and blamed the government as the origin of problems.

Moreover, as Zuoyeben's feed showed, it was not only the government itself, but also government-related institutions—such as state-owned monopolies—which were blamed in the discussions, particularly after the Qinghua professor criticized Apple by stating that its logo was missing a grateful heart. For example, Shinho, a fashion designer with about 100,000 followers, posted a picture of a brain missing a piece, claiming it as the logo that he designed for "Zhuan Jia." This word – "Zhuan Jia" – literally means specialist. As Internet jargon, it is specifically used to satirize intellectuals who defend

government interests. Apparently, this picture was intended to discredit the professor's comments on Apple. In addition, Zhangweiran, a popular singer with about 400,000 followers, parodied the professor's comment on Apple's logo and satirized the state-owned corporations' logos:

Recently, I've noticed that CNPC's logo is missing 10 pieces. I guess they are responsibility, obligation, morality, the public good, ethics, standards, humanity, range of vision, conscience, ideas and kindness. Also, Sinopec's logo is missing a piece. I believe what is missing there is human welfare. Additionally, in the Red Cross of China's logo, the cross is surrounded by grains. I think it means that money and greediness have completely overlaid the original spirit of the Red Cross.

State corporations' market monopolies and charitable institutions' corruption scandals were used as collective memory to parody the professor's opinions of Apple. As those feeds demonstrated, the users were more dissatisfied with services provided by state corporations. Apple's after-sale service faded from the Weibo discussions' focus.

Xinhaiguang, a veteran journalist, explained such phenomena in his Weibo feed:

Last year's 3.15 program exposed McDonald's problem. I commented that foreign fast-food brands might have problems. McDonald's mistake was not throwing away leftover burgers as it promised in its advertisement. However, such a mistake was negligible, considering that many domestic restaurants were using illegal recycled-waste cooking oil. The public should weigh in their minds whether there are issues that need more attention. And then this year's focus was on Apple's after-sale service. Even though there are problems in Apple's service, its service is better than 80% of the brands in the market. Consumers should weigh this in their minds.

As Apple or McDonald's consumers, Weibo users held more credibility than they did as the state media's audience, the state corporations' consumers and the state's citizens. Sina Tech also posted an opinion piece from China Youth Daily on its Weibo account. The feed compared the freedom that Apple's consumers could enjoy with the hopelessness that the Chinese citizens had to cope with:

Since March 15, [the state] media have been attacking Apple's after-sale service. If such passion could be devoted to issues like milk formula, recycled waste oil, water pollution, air pollution and food safety, everything could be solved. It is so obvious which kind of issues are more urgent. If you don't like Apple's products or services, you can choose not to buy. However, can we refuse to eat, to drink or to breathe?

As the second theme of this case demonstrated, consumers' autonomy was a significant value emphasized in Weibo trends. This value was missing in users' offline political lives. The state media's attack on Apple was changed by Weibo discussions, which, instead of agreeing with the attack, reiterated their dissatisfaction toward the government. CCTV's attempt to raise nationalist narratives did not match with the neo-liberal orientation on Weibo and failed to resonate with most Weibo users. The story of discrimination against the Chinese became the least popular theme which emerged in the trending discussions.

#### The Issue of Equality

CCTV's attack on Apple was obviously built on nationalist narratives by emphasizing Apple's unequal service to Chinese consumers. In Zhengyuanjie's Weibo feed that followed CCTV's agenda, he also mentioned,

Apple has double standards of after-sale services for Chinese consumers and consumers in developed countries.

Therefore, the inequality to Chinese consumers here was based on the comparison to consumers in developed countries. A nationalist crisis was constructed, stating that Chinese consumers were discriminated against by a Western brand. The consumerist narrative was packaged with a nationalist discourse to invoke the memory of Western countries' invasion of China. The feeds supporting CCTV followed this storyline, particularly after Apple China posted Tim Cook's letter in response to the whole issue.

They emphasized it as China's victory over Apple's arrogance. However, those feeds in general received fewer than 100 comments and reposts. It seemed that Sina Weibo displayed these feeds on the summary page only to balance points of view.

At first glance, the unpopularity of the nationalist theme in Apple's case seemed to conflict with previous literature about the strong value of national pride in Chinese society. One explanation was that this theme was constructed by a state media entity and belonged to the state nationalism that credited the Party with the nation's salvation. One of my previous studies (Liu & Berkowitz, 2013) on Chinese neo-liberal media's coverage of Steve Jobs' death found that neo-liberal nationalism did not regard the West as an enemy to fight but rather as a model to learn from. Apple was praised as an iconic symbol of Western liberal capitalism's success. Also, both neo-liberal nationalism and populist nationalism emphasized separating the concept of China as a state from the concept of China as a country. To further understand the demystification of the state-media's narratives, the following interviews provide more details and background.

#### “Badly Mismatched Players”

My questions for the interviewees included reasons why nationalist narratives in Apple's case failed to resonate with Weibo users, particularly considering that in the previous milk formula case, nationalism was a significant component. Their answers in general indicated that CCTV versus Apple was a battle between two badly mismatched players. In other words, CCTV as a media brand lost its reputation among Weibo users a long time ago, while Apple has a large number of loyal consumers on Weibo.



On the surface, Weibo users' revolt against CCTV's program was due to the "Publish around 8:20" incident that revealed its campaign strategy on Weibo. For example, EL, a social media planner in Shanghai, pointed out:

Because CCTV's plot was caught at the moment that the program was still on air, that was the most important reason...

I then asked whether Weibo users would have similar reactions if they found similar strategies used by other commercial brands. For example, if they found some Big Vs posting advertorials for other commercial campaigns, would Weibo users in general dislike the brands, the campaigns or the Big Vs? EL believed so based on her experience. Several experienced social media strategists also confirmed this possibility. For instance, Fox, who has served on several brands' social media campaigns on Weibo, mentioned,

[Anyone] doing Weibo campaigns has to be extremely cautious, not to trigger users' antipathy, not to let them see a trace of the advertising message. We always prepare to repair unexpected reactions.

Roger, a Shanghai-based digital campaign professional, discussed some complementary cases:

Sometimes, it is fine for users to find out that some Weibo content is planned for campaign purposes. In these cases, the content has to be fun like viral stuff so that users would love to disseminate it.

The 3.15 program's Weibo content was not a fun case as Roger suggested. Even worse, it indeed triggered users' antipathy. GYJ, a Beijing-based social media manager, commented,

Weibo users are extremely disgusted with content which says what they should or should not do... Meanwhile, human beings by nature like to see others' mistakes. It was so entertaining to see such a stupid mistake from CCTV.

In addition, HW, a marketing strategist for a financial media firm, asserted that CCTV as a national network should be different from commercial brands:

The “Publish around 8:20” incident exposed that CCTV invited those Big Vs to attack Apple on purpose... From my point of view, news cannot be planned by marketing strategies... An issue becomes high profile when it is indeed significant... Trending discussion should occur spontaneously instead of strategically.

The “Publish around 8:20” incident was not the first time that CCTV caused Weibo users’ denouncement. CYJ mentioned,

You know that the Internet users satirized CCTV as CCAV (AV meaning adult video). The 3.15 program was like an entertaining show that has very low credibility. Audiences know that whatever happened on the program was related to advertisement revenues or for the government’s propaganda purposes. The program now has nothing to do with exposing problematic products. At least, the Internet users don’t believe that the program still represents consumers’ rights. Non-Internet users may still believe the program.

HP, a Guangzhou-based magazine editor, pointed out,

For years, CCTV has been well known as the Party’s mouthpiece, only reporting wonderfulness, never exposing the dark side [of the society]. For example, during last Chinese New Year, [its news program] grabbed passers-by in front of the camera and forced them to answer whether they felt blissful... You can tell how people dislike CCTV, which has never reported any real news but has only been broadcasting propaganda... The network only produces falsehood, exaggerations, and empty words, so has been losing credibility and reputation among the public for a long time.

Therefore, the “Publish around 8:20” case only reinforced Weibo users’ negative perceptions of the media. In other words, Weibo users were not surprised to discover the program’s “conspiracies.” Instead, they seemed to have been waiting for something to confirm their existing perceptions of CCTV. Peter Ho’s accidental mistake happened to be that incident. Moreover, the perception of CCTV as the Party’s mouthpiece also explained why the discussion of Apple’s after-sale services shifted to criticism of the government. Similar to the trending feeds, many interviewees also brought up the comparison of CCTV’s emphasis on Apple with the government’s neglect of livelihood

issues such as food safety, air pollution and domestic milk formula quality. GF commented,

Helping citizens live a prosperous and contented life is a government's basic responsibility. The public has not benefited from the country's rising GDP... The case made the public feel as if they were being treated as fools.

NL, a fashion media professional in Guangzhou also said,

A national network made such a stupid mistake. It symbolized the stupidity of the government.

Additionally, the interviewees offered several conspiracy theories to explain CCTV's attack of Apple. All these theories could be categorized into three versions. The first version was the same as Zhuomoxiansheng's Weibo feed that CCTV was attacking Apple to "blackmail" advertising revenues. The second version was that Samsung conspired with CCTV. The third version was more popular. This version posited that the state was cracking down on transnational brands' influence on the Chinese market. For instance, MS commented,

The state may want to foster domestic brands but in the wrong way. Take South Korea as an example. That government did a nice job supporting domestic brands, such as Hyundai and Samsung. What they did was to produce great products first and then encourage domestic consumers to buy. Our government just tells us not to buy non-domestic products, but we don't have comparable products. Therefore, no one would care about what CCTV said.

Interestingly, the previous battle between Google and the Chinese government in 2010 was repeatedly referred to in explanation of this theory, even though in Google's case, freedom of speech was the main concern, which was not an emphasis in Apple's case. For instance, HXS, a newspaper columnist, commented,

Apple was suffering a similar situation as Google. [CCTV's attack on Apple] essentially was the government's trade protectionism, which has not benefited individual consumers.

Similarly, the 3.15 program's previous attack on McDonald's was also mentioned to explain Apple's case. For instance, RC, a public relations account director in Guangzhou, commented:

Consumers would prefer to trust brands of large corporations, such as Apple and (last year) McDonald's. Similarly, there is recent propaganda on media attacking foreign brands' infant formula. However, consumers still prefer foreign brands over domestic brands. Consumers have their own judgments.

McDonald's example was also referred to in Xinhaiguang's trending feed about consumers' preference for international brands, although Apple and McDonald's were brands of completely different products. These examples showed how social media users relied on collective memory to make sense of trending events and to reinforce enduring perceptions.

In contrast to CCTV's poor reputation, Apple, on the hand, was a favorite of Weibo users. As a trending feed showed, even the feeds echoing the 3.15 program's view criticizing Apple were sent through iPhone Client. HP commented,

For one thing, CCTV has lost its credibility; for another thing, it picked the wrong battle. It is Apple! Apple is such a globally influential brand. Its culture, its founder Steve Jobs and his idea – all of these are so pervasive among its consumers... Since Weibo became popular, Apple has further expanded its influence. Weibo and iPhone 4 became popular at the same time. All of a sudden, I found everyone around me using an iPhone 4... Indeed, Weibo interface looks much better on an iPhone 4 than on any other smartphone.

Many interviewees also mentioned HP's perception about Apple. WL's job was analyzing Weibo users and he pointed out:

We have to take a look at which group is influenced by Apple. First of all, those people in general are well-educated and admire this brand so much. Apple's fans are so powerful on Weibo and on the mobile Internet. The rate of their interaction and activity are remarkable. Apple fans are "fiends." Whichever product Apple launches, they go for it. They are so satisfied by enjoyment and convenience from Apple. They don't care about, or they are actually satisfied by, Apple's after-sale service.

Several interviewees, such as HW and GF, both explained that Apple's after-sale service was established under China's Consumer Protection Law and other consumer rights regulations. In other words, the 3.15 program should actually blame the domestic policies for causing Apple's discriminatory service. MS directly noted,

Apple is not simply a brand but a culture. It inaugurated a new era of smart phones and a new lifestyle. This kind of loyalty is more valued than the so-called nationalism [imposed by the state] among Apple fans.

ZAB commented that the battle between Apple and CCTV was essentially the conflict between Apple's corporate culture and China's political culture:

Steve Jobs was a very driven person who wanted to change the world with his products...In contrast, all the Chinese corporations, first of all, have to follow the Party. Otherwise, all the money you earn would be gone and you would "die." However, Apple China resolutely refused to follow the Party's leading. Thus, this corporation must be attacked by the Party's media. Apple has earned so much profit in China but never yielded to the state-owned telecom monopolies such as China Unicom and China Mobile or yielded to the government. Apple was a bad example for the government to choose to control transnational giants.

ZAB implied that Apple's arrogance in relation to the Chinese government dovetailed with Weibo users' dissatisfaction with the government. He further pointed out,

To some degree, Apple indeed treated Chinese consumers differently. Weibo users may not completely support Apple but they dislike CCTV more. CCTV should focus on more important things.

Leo, a Beijing-based social media manager with ten years of professional experience, also indicated that Weibo users support the transnational giant rather than the state network:

CCTV's 3.15 program originally intended to represent individual consumers to fight against powerful monopolies. However, for years, the annual program has been abusing the media's power to crack down on brands that the government does not like. Therefore, from the audience's point of view, CCTV and the government are the monopolies.

HXS, the Guangzhou-based columnist, also pointed out that the state monopoly was more repellent to Chinese consumers:

In China, monopolization is rarely based on market competition but instead on administrative intervention. Consumers don't suffer a lot from market-based monopolies but have more negative feelings toward the state-owned corporate monopolies. To some degree, consumers actually support market-based monopolies to compete with the government.

Based on these interviewees' comments and findings from the online observation, I came to the conclusion that Weibo users were more willing to accept their identities as international brands' consumers than their identities as citizens under the current regime. I shared this opinion with interviewees; some agreed with me and others brought up contrary opinions. For instance, AA agreed with me:

Definitely! Because they don't feel the sense of participating the state...[In contrast,] they interact with brands by buying and commenting on products.

Also, he agreed with my assumption that the identity as consumers was associated with free choices, which were absent under their identity as citizens: "Availability of choices also means freedom and a sense of security." AA emphasized:

The government's propaganda always tries to confuse the concept of state with the concept of country. In fact, these are two different concepts. We blame the state – the government—but we have never attacked our nation.

XY, an online-public-opinion analyst in Beijing, also pointed out,

CCTV tried so hard to raise this issue to the nationalist level, but Weibo users were not fooled.

He also did not think that Weibo users rejected their cultural identities as Chinese but simply did not accept the label of "Chinese" as imposed by the state media. WX, based on his 18-year experience as a journalist, further explained why Weibo users did not support CCTV's nationalist tone:

Whether the Weibo users would support international corporations to fight against the government, it is case by case...The Chinese in general hold very strong nationalist identities... I bet if you attack Apple's cultural imperialism on Weibo, you would receive a lot of supportive responses...However, the public does not only care about an opinion but also pays attention to who proposed the opinion. In other words, when an opinion is proposed by CCTV, it becomes harder for the online users to accept.

Therefore, the interviewees' opinions supported my previous interpretation of neo-liberal nationalism. Because CCTV was a symbol of the state, its nationalist attack on Apple was perceived as the manifestation of state nationalism, which credited the regime with salvation and protection of the nation. It did not successfully resonate with Weibo users, because neo-liberal nationalism, which emphasized the separation of the state from the nation, was more popular on Weibo. Overall, both the online observation and interviews showed intensive disgust at the government on Weibo. Thus, as also seen in the first case, there is a negotiation among Weibo users' political, economic and cultural identities.

The program's original point of view was to criticize Apple's discriminative after-sale services for Chinese consumers. However, Weibo users did not accept the identity of "Chinese" as proposed by the state media, because this identity was perceived as having political meanings attached. Lack of political participation and suffering from state monopolies lead to the rejection of the state nationalist narratives. Furthermore, as an international brand's consumers or even "fans," they received free choices and thus perceived a sense of participation. Also, they were willing to see the international giant's bargain with the state, even though Apple did not treat them equally with consumers in other nations. In other words, the Weibo users were less concerned with unequal rules of globalization. They even expected that global economic power could compete with the authoritarian regime. Additionally, since Apple's case did not involve "Chinese" as a

cultural identity, the conflict between the political and the economic identities did not impact the sustainment of the cultural identity. Therefore, the nationalist theme was not popular within the trending discussions.

“Trendingworthy” Values, Cultural Significance  
and Crucial Agents

The second case again manifested discontent with the government as the milk formula case did, although this issue was completely different from the first one. The state media tried to present an identity crisis of Chinese consumers, but on Weibo the issue finally turned out to be an identity crisis of the state media. The “Publish around 8:20” incident was merely a mistake in the program’s campaign plan. However, this mistake resonated with Weibo users’ enduring perception about the media and the government behind the media. As a result, the mistake was immediately amplified and became material for Weibo users to repeat their dissatisfaction against the government and governmental collaborators. In general, the government was perceived as failing to ensure its citizens’ basic quality of livelihood. Its collaborators included state-owned media that spoke for the state propaganda, state-run corporations that benefited from administrative monopolization, and specialists that defended the state’s interests. Collective memory of poisoned formula, air pollution, and water quality was again refreshed to contextualize the discontent.

In contrast, Apple’s after-sale service was not the focus of the trending discussions. As the interviewees explained, CCTV’s story of Apple did not fit into Weibo users’ existing perception of the brand as an icon of high-quality technology and advanced lifestyles. Instead, the criticism of Apple was reconstructed as the government’s



protectionism. Previous cases of Google and McDonald's "suffering" in China became the context to make sense of Apple's case, even though the specific focuses were not identical. Overall, Weibo discussions expressed a sympathetic attitude toward these international brands' "battle" with the government.

This case again demonstrated a neo-liberal orientation. The state media delivered the state nationalist narratives that proposed that Chinese consumers needed governmental protection in the global market. However, these narratives were rejected and debunked by the repeated theme that this government could not even meet the citizens' basic living needs. For one thing, the individual consumers have not benefited from the state's protectionism. For another thing, they have a more direct sense of the state's monopoly violation of their rights as consumers. Therefore, as this case revealed, the Weibo users' support of international brands should also be understood within the authoritarian political system and the limited market economy.

Consistent with findings in my previous studies, Weibo users' perceptions of Apple demonstrated an agreement with Western liberal capitalism. Apple symbolized innovation, creativity, and, more importantly, freedom. Consumption of international brands allowed consumers to enjoy free choices that were absent in their political lives. They could feel the sense of participation through consumption practice, when such a sense of participation did not exist in their political identities. In addition, these international giants were admired as winners in market competitions, which symbolized higher quality and more advanced techniques. In contrast, the domestic market competition was constrained by the state's interventions. There was a utopian expectation that globalization could push the boundary of the regime's control. Those powerful

international business giants were able to bargain with the state. In other words, the consumers did not only reject the state as their representative against the international monopolies, but furthermore they regarded these big brands as representing them against the state. Their embrace of globalization was essentially a way to negotiate with the state.

In this consumerist ritual, Weibo was the crucial platform for its users to reverse the state media's attempt at propaganda. The media's mistake was infinitely amplified by social media's instant communication speed. The Weibo discussion's focus was completely sidetracked away from the original topic set up by the program. Since there was a strong discontent with government on Weibo, and the state media was perceived as the mouthpiece for the government, the media may become part of the trending topics but not the crucial agent with cultural capital in the Weibo field. In both the milk formula case and the Apple case, the crucial agents were the Big Vs and grass roots users who could quickly construct the narratives of a trending issue with livelihood concerns and discontent with government. In other words, they understood the "rules" of trending discussions. Criticizing the government was a key in gaining cultural capital in the Weibo field.

Additionally, it is noticeable that Apple itself does not have accounts on any Chinese social media sites. In the entire case, Apple only communicated with its consumers via its official website. In other words, Apple – the brand itself - did not participate in this consumerist ritual in the Weibo field. The users relied on the brand's consumerist values to make sense of trending topics. This also demonstrated that the social media field was not separated from the offline culture. The online field was interacting with the offline society. In China's situation, the social media site provided a

platform that may not exist in the real world to participate in societal activities and to negotiate identity conflicts.

## CHAPTER VII

### CASE 3 “MICRO-CHARITY” AND “TRANSPARENT CHARITY”: EARTHQUAKE RELIEF DONATIONS ON WEIBO

On April 20, 2013, a  $M_s$  (Magnitude Scale) 7.0 earthquake occurred in Lushan County, Ya'an, Sichuan Province. About 1.5 million people were affected by the earthquake. The natural disaster paused other on-going social issues and immediately became the top topic on Weibo. Under the umbrella topic of the earthquake, one sub-topic was about relief donation calls. For the Ya'an earthquake, donations were handled differently than previous disaster donations. State-affiliated charities such as Red Cross Society of China (RCSC) used to be the main channels for donations, but this time Weibo provided platforms for many other non-governmental organizations. Within 57 hours of the earthquake, there were 36 relief donation projects campaigning on Sina Weibo. All the projects shared a special donation platform called “Micro-Charity.” Within 72 hours, about 400 million RMB (Renminbi: the currency of the People's Republic of China; about 66 million USD,) were collected for earthquake relief through the online platform. The donation platform created another hash tag—“Transparent Charity”—calling on transparent disbursement of all donations.

On April 24, the Hong Kong SAR Legislative Council Finance Committee rejected Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying's proposal to allocate 100 million HKD (Hong Kong Dollar: the currency of Hong Kong; about 14 million USD) for Ya'an earthquake relief. This incident became part of the overall discussions on relief donations. On the same day, The Supervision Committee of the Red Cross Society of China announced on its Sina Weibo its intention to investigate Guo Meimei – the woman I mentioned in the very

beginning of this dissertation – and her relationship with the Red Cross Society of China (RCSC). However, two days later, the Chairman of RCSC denied the existence of the investigation. The so-called investigation eventually ended up without further updates and resulted in another “circle of conspiracy” discussion about RCSC’s corruption. All these incidents – Micro-Charity, Hong Kong’s rejection, and the investigation of Guo Meimei – received focus in both my online observation and the interviews that followed. Two general themes emerged from the entire donation issue. The first theme emphasized positive images of non-governmental charities. The second theme contrasted negative images of governmental charities and further criticized the political system’s problems. In general, this case manifested neo-liberal praise of public goods’ non-governmental features.

#### Micro-Charity, Non-governmental, More Transparency

Feeds categorized in the first theme showed that Weibo was a powerful channel for non-governmental charities to promote their influence. Meanwhile, charitable consumption received positive responses on Weibo.

Immediately after the earthquake, Sina Weibo’s charity account – Weigongyi (literally meaning Micro-Charity) announced an online project:

Every Weibo user is worried about the Ya’an’s situation, so Sina Weigongyi has now launched a charity project #Donate for Ya’an# to integrate energy and resources from the entire society and to help people there go through the difficult time.

Within 57 hours, 36 charities posted donation calls on the Micro-Charity platform, but RCSC – the country’s biggest charitable organization – was not one of them.

Among all donation calls feeds, One Foundation’s feeds received the largest number of reposts and comments. In less than three hours, its feeds had been reposted

more than 17,700 times. One Foundation was originally founded by the movie star Jet Li and was a project of the Red Cross Society of China. In 2010, it became a fully independent charity. All eleven of its board members were famous business figures. On the evening of the day the earthquake hit, Jet Li posted on his Weibo:

Two years ago, I became the first signed ambassador of the International Red Cross Society to promote RSC's spirit of "Humanity, Neutrality, Philanthropy, and Commitment," which we should respect and support. One Foundation's members should disseminate positive energy. Let's stay rational, mature, sustainable, professional and transparent for charity and the public good. We need time for improvement. As long as it does not touch the bottom line or fundamental principles, please be tolerant of other charity institutions as they develop.

It should be noted that Jet Li emphasized his relationship with the International Red Cross Society instead of the Red Cross Society of China, which is not supervised by IRSC but is instead affiliated with the Ministry of Health. RCSC's staff enjoys welfare benefits as public servants.

Similarly, LeeKaifu wrote a long Weibo to recommend Give2Asia – an American charity institution – as a channel for relief donations from overseas. At the beginning of his endorsement, LeeKaifu highlighted:

Give2Asia will track each donation's disbursement, which will be operated by local coordinators in China. Give2Aisa will report the disbursement to donors.

He then listed the charity's coordinators in China and particularly emphasized that RCSC was not one of the coordinators. Both Jet Li's and LeeKaifu's feeds showed that non-RCSC affiliation but international affiliation was a selling point for charities.

Transparency was repeatedly mentioned in those donation calls. The body copy of the #Transparent Charity# hash tag read:

We expect that all the money will be used to buy more armored concrete, to build more solid houses, to pave more scientifically constructed roads, and to protect our families. We hope that every

penny of the donation is transparently used, and is accurately disbursed. This is how we respond to awe-inspiring disaster.

It showed that the right to know was an important demand from Weibo users in the donation issue. Those charities later also respectively disclosed, on their Weibo accounts, how donations were spent.

In addition, many corporations and enterprises used their Weibo accounts to publicize their contribution to relief efforts. For instance, Google China announced its 5 million RMB donation and the openness of Google People Finder – its online service for missing people search – and emphasized the service’s coordination with other Chinese local search engines. An online gaming company announced a poke game for donation fundraising on its Weibo account. Another app development firm posted that each repost it received would turn to a one-RMB donation for a family that lost their child in the earthquake. The feed also inserted an advertisement for the app that the firm developed. As I mentioned before, Apple China does not run a Weibo account. However, it was not forgotten by its fans on Weibo. Dapengkantianxia – the chief editor of a news website – shared a screenshot of Apple China’s homepage, which mourned the victims. He then commented in his feed,

[The most “immoral” corporation donated 50 million RMB!] On April 22, the American corporation, Apple, which has been blamed by several Chinese media as the most immoral corporation, took action. It donated 50 million RMB for the earthquake relief and provided brand-new Apple products for schools in the afflicted areas. Also, the corporation will have people to provide disaster relief...

The feed did not only praise Apple’s benefaction, but also implied a satirical take on the media that blamed Apple as immoral. Considering media coverage about Apple before the earthquake, I assumed that the feed was referring to the 3.15 program’s attack on

Apple. When these two issues were associated and contrasted, Apple's relief contribution was amplified and the state media's credibility was in question again.

In general, donation calls on Weibo were mainly from non-governmental charities. The social media site was also a platform for content that packaged charity services with commercial messages. Donating money became a quasi-consumption behavior, and, like other commercial endeavors, charities need social media campaigns, celebrity endorsements, and "after-donation" services. The public has been given choices in their selection of reliable charities. In contrast, the second theme harshly criticized the domination of the government in disaster relief.

#### "The System's Problem:" More than Disaster Relief

In contrast to tolerance of non-governmental charities, the government's role in disaster relief was harshly criticized on Weibo. The memory of governmental charity corruption in previous disasters was repeated. For instance, in contrast to the previous milk formula ban that led to some Weibo users' nationalist blaming of the Hong Kong government, Hong Kong's rejection of the donation proposal did not raise similar debates. The legislative rejection was due to councilors' concern about donation disbursement, so this rejection mainly evoked Weibo users' collective memory.

Laoxushiping, an independent columnist with about 360,000 followers, commented on his Weibo:

Hong Kong used to be very engaging in Mainland's disaster relief, but was surprisingly calm after the Ya'an Earthquake... Its donation for the Wenchuan Earthquake (The magnitude 8.0 earthquake in the same province in 2008) was misappropriated. Aided school buildings were demolished for real estate projects. Hong Kongers' feelings were totally understandable. Mainland government should reflect on this. Otherwise, do not blame (Hong Kong) people not with us.



In another feed, Guanshiyintong, a Shenzhen-based writer with about 260,000 followers, posted a picture of Lu Shan County People's Hospital and wrote:

After the Ms 7.0 earthquake, the Hospital did not budge an inch, not even a piece of glass. I was wondering who said all our buildings were slapdash. However, when I took a closer look, it was aided by Macau SAR after the Wenchuan Earthquake.

In Laoxushiping's Weibo, poor-quality projects resulted from Mainland China's local government corruption, even though they were aided by Hong Kong. In

Guanshiyintong's Weibo, the one high-quality project existed purely because of its aid from Macau SAR, which does not share the same political system as Mainland China. (It is not this study's object to judge the legitimacy of these claims, but merely to point out that, in the narratives, Mainland China's government was correlated with negative results but non-Mainland governments were associated with positive results.) More directly, Zuojiacaoshujun, a radical liberal writer, attached screenshots of the Hong Kong media's questions about poorly executed relief projects after the Wenchuan Earthquake. He wrote:

Do not know how the high-levels feel when they know corruption is causing Hong Kong's rejection of 100 million donations for Ya'an... Partial anti-corruption reform cannot improve the entire system... We need complete change.

All these feeds showed that the collective memory of previous corruption of disaster relief donations explained the legitimacy of Hong Kong's aid proposal. More radically, such memory evolved into demands for political change.

In other relief-related feeds, criticism of government-associated institutions also dominated the Weibo discussion. For example, Zhanglifeng, the chief editor of Financial Times' Chinese edition, who has 330,000 followers, criticized that day's CCTV 7 O'clock News for not prioritizing earthquake relief as the headline, but instead first

reporting on a university's scholarship winner being congratulated by both China's President Xi and President Obama. Writer Bingyi, who had about 460,000 followers, expressed her concerns about "China-style disaster relief." This term was used to describe a phenomenon in which relief materials poured in only where high-level officers visited. In contrast, other affected areas ended up being neglected.

Among the government-related institutions, RCSC suffered the harshest denouncement. Right after the earthquake, RCSC kept updating the relief efforts on its official Weibo account. The content was more like a news release, such as how the Party, the Central government and high-level officers were concerned about the disaster. Each of these feeds received thousands of reposts and comments, which were full of foul language. Huhaisanren, whose verified information showing him as a poet with about 30,000 followers, commented on Weibo users' reaction to RCSC:

[RCSC received a torrent of oaths but less than 60,000 donations.]  
When big corporations and millions of individuals are engaging in Ya'an earthquake relief, RCSC's bureaucratic-tone feeds received millions of "Gun" (literal meaning: "go to hell").

In addition, this feed attached a 2009 news story that covered Guo Meimei's relationship with high-level managers of RCSC. Huhaisanren further wrote in the feed:

Someone even commented that donations to RCSC basically mean depositing money to Guo Meimei's private account. This phenomenon demonstrates that RCSC is bankrupt in reputation, as well as the inclination of the public will. The affiliated areas are where people are concerned about. Do not even think about using a disaster to make a fortune again.

In another feed, Pishiming, whose verified information showed him as a business consultant with about 111,000 followers, questioned how the earthquake donations were disbursed but inserted the #Guo Meimei Incident# hash tag at the end of his feed:

[Where has the money gone?] There are 15 million people in Ya'an. If three people are counted as 1 household, there are in total

500,000 households. If each household needs 1 million, in total, 50 million is need. Therefore, Apple's donation alone can support everyone to relocate to safe places. Actually there are billions of donations at this moment, but so many victims still do not have tents but only have water and instant noodles. Where has the money gone? #Guo Meimei Incident#

This feed immediately received more than 10,000 reposts. As both feeds showed, even though the Guo Meimei incident broke out in 2009 – four years before the earthquake – it was still vividly fresh as a collective memory when the public questioned RCSC's reputation. It should be noted that Pishiming's feed also constructed a positive and powerful image for Apple, whose donations alone were described as enough to solve all problems.

It was not clear whether the Supervision Committee of the Red Cross Society's plan to reinvestigate Guo Meimei was related to RCSC's reputation becoming bankrupt on Weibo. The so-called reinvestigation ended up without any updates, but only raised another wave of conspiracy guesses on Weibo. My questions to interviewees mainly concerned two points: how they understood non-governmental charities' domination on Weibo, and how they understood Guo Meimei's influence on this trending topic.

### Negotiation between the Government and the Society

In reference to the trending discussion on the Ya'an Earthquake relief donations, I asked two umbrella questions: "All donations used to go through RCSC. In contrast, what happened after the Ya'an Earthquake, when donating money became similar to making consumption choices? How should we understand these changes?" and "Why was Guo Meimei repeatedly mentioned every time RCSC was involved in a charity issue?"

The first question addressed the marketization of charity institutions. XZ, an analyst of public opinion on social media, explained how charity could be understood as a market behavior:

Charity is not so simple as offering help without return. Based on my understanding, charity has become a pool for resource integration and exchange. For example, if a charity is famous, sponsors can develop connections to influential networks. To donate money can boost donors' reputations. Therefore, everyone is looking for something in the name of charity.

In general, almost all the interviewees assumed marketization as a positive process for charities in China. Particularly, when ZAB – the Beijing-based social media manager – heard my question, his immediate reaction was to ask: “Do you think there is anything not right about this?” I told him that I personally did not hold a view about this and merely asked for his opinion. He then talked about one of his recent projects to provide a charity institution with social media strategies. Based on this experience, he pointed out:

Without commercialized operations, charity institutions have suffered from a lot of misunderstanding and miscommunication. Our Chinese fellows do not lack enthusiasm for charity but do lack channels for charity. A good charity brand needs commercialized campaigns so that more people will be aware of these channels.

He also mentioned that in foreign countries such as America, it was a common practice to use commercial strategies to increase brand awareness of charities. I added a follow-up question, stating that commercialized charities were criticized by scholars as an indirect way to make profits for corporations. As a result, some problems, such as breast cancer, were hyped while other problems, such as lung cancer, were downplayed (King, 2006). I was wondering whether similar concerns might be present in China. ZAB replied by contextualizing commercialized charities in the larger political and economic background:

Everything has both good and bad sides... Should we worry about similar problems in China? Sure, I think so... However, market-oriented charity is certainly better than government-oriented charity. You know why? So many things in China have been monopolized by the government. Governmental charity... You know why the public dislikes RCSC? In our country, electricity, petroleum, and all these things were monopolized by the government. Also, how is our tax spent? People have kept questioning but have received no answers. Citizens feed so many public servants, who are so rude to us. Tax is the money that we are forced to hand over to the state. (We have no idea how it is spent.) How do we know our donations are spent by those governmental charities? Of course, we are dissatisfied. In contrast, non-governmental charities would disclose their disbursements and financial affairs.

As ZAB stated, lack of transparency and lack of choices were two main reasons mentioned by interviewees why governmental charities lost their credibility. Also, governmental charities and all other government-related institutions were perceived as dishonest monopolies.

JX, another Beijing-based social media strategy entrepreneur who also had charity clients, made similar comments. He assumed that the analogy of charity as merchandise was absolutely accurate, as he had helped a charity client with information disclosures and public relations maintenance. He personally had witnessed how market-oriented changes boosted charity organizations' development. Regarding the concerns of business corporations' manipulation of charity projects, he also suggested we consider the issue within China's political context:

In China, business manipulation is not yet a problem to worry about. It may be a problem for the United States, since the American government is somehow manipulated by big corporations. I don't know too much about the U.S., but for China's charity industry, it is a positive change with more market competition... We are facing different problems than the Americans are.

Additionally, LYS noted that market-oriented charities could enrich the variety of charity projects. As a Guangzhou-based fashion media professional, LYS had lots of connections with charities in Hong Kong. She commented:

Hong Kong's commercial society is very well developed. There are various charities in Hong Kong focusing on all kinds of issues, such as caring for seniors, domestic violence, children's problems and so on. Charities' developers in Hong Kong indeed had a history of being naive and immature. However, because the commercial culture had a solid foundation, charities have been gradually operated as brands in the market. In this way, charities have to think about their reputation and also how to convince donors. Marketing strategies are the same as selling products, but charities are selling their services. Because the commercial society is very mature, charities' marketization has become successful.

LYS used charities in Hong Kong as examples, repeatedly emphasizing the importance of a commercially mature society to support success for charities' marketization.

Moreover, WX, as a veteran financial journalist, further explained the importance of charity marketization in Mainland China:

Charities are supposed to be nongovernmental institutions that spontaneously and efficiently help solve problems in society. Our government holds distrustful attitudes toward these institutions.

He further explained that the law differentiated public charities from private charities:

Only public charities are allowed to publicly solicit funds that will eventually be nationalized. In other words, all publicly collected money will be turned over to Red Cross Society of China and China Charity Foundation – the two state-affiliated public charities. [The process] was essentially a hammer blow for all other charities.

WX then pointed out that even though this required process may be reasonable in some ways, it indeed counteracts spontaneous aid in society. People did not have much autonomy to choose reliable charities that they trust. WX believed that the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake was a great opportunity for nongovernmental charities to develop their brand awareness. The public's charity consciousness was also awakened during the

2008 earthquake. People were more willing to support disaster relief. In contrast, the legislation and the structure of the charity industry had no changes at all. As a result, there has been market space for private charities. WX particularly pointed out Weibo's significance for private charities:

Those charities need more funding but cannot publicly solicit donations... They cannot advertise themselves but they need to promote public awareness. It is a common and legitimate way for them to publicize their efforts via Weibo.

Therefore, as the government had lost its credibility, so did organizations, institutions or individuals with governmental affiliations, such as state-owned monopolies, state-affiliated charities, state media, and specialists who defended state propaganda. This was the significant background to understand the enthusiasm of charity commercialization on Weibo.

In addition, as WX pointed out, the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake was a milestone for the public devotion to charities. As several previously-mentioned trending feeds showed, that earthquake was indeed a collective memory for Weibo users to understand charity's role in disaster relief. The Guo Meimei scandal broke up in June 2009, which was a year after the Wenchuan Earthquake and also the time that Weibo started to explode. Therefore, the scandal was grounded in the historical context of the public's negative images of nationalized public charities. I was curious why this scandal was so powerful within Weibo users' responses even after four years. Several interviewees believed that this scandal fit into Weibo users' preference. GYJ, based on her more than 10 years of experience in online commercial campaigns, explained:

The Guo Meimei affair was so entertaining! First of all, she is a pretty lady. Second, she was showing off her wealth. This point triggered almost everyone's curiosity. Third, (the rumor was that) she was someone's mistress. Therefore, gossip, politics, money, and hatred of the rich... all kinds of entertaining components were

included in this issue. The more entertaining components were involved, the more likely the issue would grab the public attention.

Fox, a Shanghai-based social media account manager, also expressed similar opinions that the Guo Meimei affair contained many captivating points for the public, such as corruption, governmental monopoly, sexual scandals and showing off luxury products. GF had 18 years of experience as a public relations professional in Guangzhou. He personally has been a private charity organizer. He thought that Guo Meimei actually did a “good” thing:

Personally, I think Guo Meimei is kind of innocent... I do not hate her. There is nothing wrong with a young lady showing off her Louis Vuitton or Prada purses, just a little bit pretentious. However, Guo’s showing-off actually helped a lot of people find out SCSC’s true colors...

AA has been the manager of a social-media-consulting firm for 4 years. One of his job duties was to deal with big data of Weibo. He found that many Big Vs were eager to lead trending discussions of political scandals. He took Zuoyeben as an example. Recalling Zuoyeben’s comment of “Two Breasts” on the previous Hong Kong’s milk formula ban, I agreed with AA. NL, as a fashion media editor, joked that compared with private charities looking for celebrities as spokespeople, Guo Meimei had been the spokesperson for RCSC:

Guo Meimei may not actually have affiliation with RCSC. Even today, the entire issue is still mysterious to the public... Well, because of its mysteriousness, there are so many conspiracy theories and rumors. Also, Guo’s original issue was also related to Sina Weibo’s identity verification system. No one had explained how Guo got a verified account as the manager of a RCSC’s affiliate. Anyhow, the mysteriousness reinforced the public’s perception of government’s non-transparency.

Since the so-called “reinvestigation of Guo Meimei” ended up with no further updates, the public’s previous perception of RCSC’s corruption and non-transparency was refreshed again. This also explained why the Micro-Charity platform repeatedly



emphasized transparency, which could separate them from nationalized public charities. State-controlled charities' corrupt image had been so vivid in the public's collective memory, that the possible problems of market-oriented charities were dispensable in the Weibo discussions. HW, the marketing manager of a financial magazine, pointed out:

It is too early to worry about those potential problems at this moment. Let the market develop a little bit. When problems emerge, those charities can correct themselves (based on market rules).

This opinion echoed the liberal belief in the market's self-correction mechanism. In addition, HW did not think that RCSC's reputation was indeed bankrupted:

The institution's online reputation may be hurt but it was very well protected by the current system in the offline world. Individual donations meant nothing to RCSC. Its valuable members were big corporations connected with all levels of government.

Similar opinions were also brought up by GYJ:

RCSC does not care about online users' perception of it at all... RCSC mainly relies on governmental compulsory donations and corporations' tax-free donations. Individual donations have little influence on its funding composition.

This explained why RCSC did not join the Micro-Charity channel but only used its Weibo account to release propaganda-like content instead of interactive content to communicate with users. As this case demonstrated, Weibo was a platform for societal agents to integrate fragmented forces to create non-governmental possibilities under the powerful influence of the current authoritarian regime.

### Doxa, Cultural Meanings and Agents

The earthquake was an unexpected disaster that paused other on-going social issues at that moment. In such a situation, conventional mass media is used as a major platform for society to recover, to find and offer relief, and to reinforce significant values (Kitch &

Hume, 2007). The Ya'an earthquake was a case which showed how Weibo has become an alternative medium for societal recovery. Although this disaster was unexpected, trendingworthy values, cultural significance and crucial agents which emerged in this trending topic were not unexpected.

Similar to the previous two cases, criticism of governmental institutions' irresponsibility in earthquake relief again became the major theme in trending discussions. RCSC was the target of public censure. The collective memory of a four-year-old scandal was repeatedly used to reinforce the institution's corrupt image. More importantly, the criticism was not limited to RCSC, but essentially targeted the government and the entire political system. As the trending feeds showed, RCSC's monopoly of charity was analogous to state-owned corporations' monopoly of electricity, petrol and telecommunication industries. RCSC's corruption was "coherent" with governmental corruption. RCSC staff affair scandals were no different from government officers' scandals. Political components became the criteria for Weibo users to evaluate charity projects' execution. Non-Mainland-government aided construction was praised for its solid quality. Poorly executed relief projects were attributed to the Mainland government's involvement. Moreover, Hong Kong's rejection of disaster relief proposals did not raise nationalist emotions as the previous milk formula ban did, because Hong Kong's concern about donation abuse was understandable to Weibo users. The donation rejection even evoked a direct call for political change.

In contrast, non-governmental charities', transnational corporations', and enterprises' images were positively constructed in relief donation discussions. Transparency was the most emphasized feature of charity promotion on Weibo. The

social media site's characteristics also supported the execution of transparency. Weibo made it possible for private charities to promote public awareness of their institutions, so that the public would have knowledge of other donation choices rather than just RCSC. Also, it was believed that charities could disclose information about themselves on Weibo and accept public scrutiny, because the fast information dissemination on Weibo could amplify the circulation of mistakes or scandals. It was harder to operate damage control and reputation repair.

Therefore, Weibo assisted market-oriented changes in charity practices. Governmental charities were no longer the only channels. From donors' perspectives, choosing a charity institution was similar to choosing a product. Charity institutions offer services to integrate and reorganize resources to provide help for targeted groups. These institutions coordinated with social agents, such as social media companies, public intellectuals, celebrities and business figures, to compete with government domination in charity services. Additionally, to package commercial messages with charity information was a common practice on Weibo. Commercial forces were regarded as an influential power to push back against the government's control of society.

Similar to the previous two cases, the trending discussions on earthquake relief donations demonstrated neo-liberal beliefs on Weibo. Demand of governmental withdrawal from social interest affairs, belief in market competition, and trust of transnational brands were all common manifestations in previous neo-liberalism literature (King, 2006). Before making any normative judgment of neo-liberalism in China, I would argue for contextualizing it, as the interviewees did. As this case showed, even though RCSC's reputation seemed to have been bankrupted because of the Guo Meimei

incident, this government-affiliated institution still refused to disclose how Guo Meimei was exactly related to the institution. As one of the interviewees pointed out, the public had a lower tolerance for government's monopoly than they did for market-oriented monopoly.

Thus, neo-liberalism in China is grounded in the background of a powerful government that seems ubiquitous in people's political, economic and cultural lives. In charity affairs, the government created regulations to limit non-governmental charities' development, as to maintain sharp vigilance on the formation and growth of societal institutions. At the same time, governmental institutions took advantage of the political system to abuse their power. Governmental domination left an unbalanced market with limited choices. In other words, people's feelings of powerlessness in regard to their political identity also occurred when they were consumers of products or services from state-monopolized industries. For the same reason, Weibo discussions showed hope for market-oriented changes in the charity industry and the acceptance of transnational and enterprise brands' commercial messages packaged with charity content.

The earthquake relief donation case also showed that in Weibo rituals, crucial agents were mainly liberal public intellectuals, celebrities and business figures. Weibo content fit with the neo-liberal orientation on Weibo. As LeeKaifu's donation call feed showed, he particularly emphasized the charity's international background and disbursement information. Jet Li also pointed out his One Foundation's independence and transparency. In contrast, although the governmental institution – RCSC – had its Weibo account, it failed to initiate interactive communication with users. Instead, its account became a platform for users to express discontent. Therefore, Weibo was a field with its

own rules of communication. RCSC's governmental background did not match with the overall distrust of the government on Weibo. The collective memory of the previous scandal was reinforced by the inexplicable "reinvestigation." RCSC's Weibo feeds did not follow "rules" in the Weibo field.

Considering the three cases together, I found criticism of government as a consistent theme; neo-liberalism as a critical cultural theme; and Big Vs as crucial agents in trending topics. To further understand "rules" in the Weibo field, I asked clarification questions of my interviewees. The next chapter will elaborate the interviewees' overall opinions about Weibo's cultural meanings.

## CHAPTER VIII

### RESENTMENT, EXPECTATION, AND BIG V: CLARIFICATION OF WEIBO DOXA AND FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

The online observation focused on three different trending topics involving consumerist elements from March to April 2013. The first case was about a restriction on a product. The second case involved media coverage of a brand's crisis and the ensuing crisis of the media itself, as covered by Weibo. The third case was about quasi-consumption behavior after a major natural disaster. As the previous three chapters showed, although these were three different types of incidents, the trending discussions revealed shared themes, values and agents. To further understand cultural meanings of Weibo, I asked several clarification and follow-up questions of my interviewees. All those questions were under three umbrella questions: "Why did those consumption-related trending topics on Weibo include intensive criticism of government?"; "How should we regard active commercial engagement with Weibo trends?"; and "What are the Big Vs' roles in trending discussions?"

Addressing intensive criticism of government, the interviewees' answers can be sorted into three categories: (a) governmental interruption and control of consumers' freedom and rights, (b) Weibo as an alternative platform to conventional mass media, and (c) governmental control of Weibo expression.

With six years of experience in the digital advertising industry, YP believed that consumption-related topics by nature could easily draw users' engagement, because daily consumption was so relevant to everyone's life:

When people think an issue relevant to themselves, they would be very likely to care about it. They could sense themselves as part of the issue...

Based on his professional experience as a social media strategy manager, WL thought when an issue covers governmental intervention into consumption demands, it would easily become trending:

When consumers' free choices are affected – no matter whether the topic is milk formula, luxury products or other products, there would be immediately intense discussions on Weibo... Also, Weibo users are in general better educated with higher incomes. They have more information channels than lower-class people. Those users are more willing to express their opinions on issues relevant to their interests.

WL particularly pointed out that Weibo users' active engagement in political content was a consistent phenomenon on Chinese online media:

This phenomenon is because of the entire society's transition and progress. It has been reflected in all kinds of (online) media. For instance, many online forums used to be very popular. Now Baidu Tieba (another social media site) is also full of (discontented opinions). Once users' vital interests are affected, they would certainly place blame on (the government)... The government has interrupted people's life inertia. Another example is gas prices, which are irregularly adjusted by the state. When car owners witness unreasonable price increases, of course they won't be happy.

XT, another social media strategy entrepreneur, added that the powerful regime gave the public a perception of the government as behind everything:

People demand for marketization and transparency of the (political and economic) system, but essentially, everyone knows that everything is manipulated by the government... Also, the society has fragmented into different classes. All of them are sensitive about societal conflicts and crisis.

Therefore, the intensive resentment on Weibo reflected the transitional society's struggling. And consumption, particularly consumption of life necessities, was able to capture fragmented social groups' attention. Those Weibo trending topics on consumption issues were rituals for users to reinforce their perceived discontent.

Additionally, as the interviewees pointed out, lack of other platforms for expression was another reason why Weibo seemed to evoke so much anger against the government.

When I asked the interviewees about their primary information resources and portals for website news, Weibo and online forums were the most-often mentioned. None of the interviewees consumed state media except to fill professional needs. Most interviewees in Guangzhou pointed out that the *South Media Group*'s publications were still reliable conventional media with independent opinions. For instance, LYS believed if it were *Southern Weekend*— the most influential liberal publication in China – rather than CCTV bringing up Apple's after-sales problems, Weibo opinions might not be so supportive of Apple. However, other interviewees assumed that since *South Media Group* belongs to certain factions in power, its independence and credibility, while better than the state media's, was still in question. CY has been working in the advertising industry for 13 years. He mainly reposted political gossip on his Weibo. His previous Weibo account was blocked, because he reposted gossip about President Xi's family assets. He regarded consumer domestic mass media as a waste of time. I asked him about *Southern Weekend*. He replied:

No, no, neither Southern Weekend nor Global Times (a People's Daily affiliated newspaper specializing in international political news)...The Global Times is completely not trustworthy. *Southern Weekend* is more independent but its content is still somehow controlled. It is not so professional as a medium should be.

NGN was the only non-Weibo user among my interviewees, although he has been in the digital advertising industry in Shanghai for more than ten years. He is a loyal reader of *Southern Weekend*. He expressed a paradoxical attitude about Weibo or online discussions in general. On the one hand, he was dissatisfied that Weibo discussions unfolded too quickly to provide deep and rational thoughts. On the other hand, he



believed that Weibo had positive effects on societal progress, since there were not many channels available for the public to express themselves:

I am not sure if you know Beijing's Xidan Wall that caused a sensation in 1979. People posted their (political) opinions on that wall and the regime was so scared of it... Today's Weibo functions in a similar but more influential way as the Xidan Wall did at that time.

In addition, NGN proposed his ideas of three versions of China – the China on the Internet, the China on television (or in the news media), and the China in novels:

The China on the Internet is more transparent, so many problems can be exposed. The China on television particularly at 7 p.m. every day (referring to CCTV's 7 o'clock News) is so "perfect" that people seem to be enjoying happy and equal lives there... The China in novels is more like a fantasy version of reality.

NGN's observation of the dramatic contrast between the China on the Internet and the China on television news was echoed in many other interviewees' responses. For instance, XSH is an editor for a very popular Weibo account with more than 1.5 million followers. He is from a town in Northwest China and is now working in Shanghai. When discussing the case of Apple, he mentioned the discrepant perceptions of CCTV between his parents and himself. His parents are non-Internet users and loyal watchers of CCTV. After the 3.15 program, his parents criticized him for still using an iPhone. XHS pointed out the power of consumerism in identity formation:

What you consume decides who you are. Apple's consumers are different from CCTV's audiences. Our readers are different from other writers' fans. Douban (another social media site) users are different from Weibo users...

He thought Weibo was similar to a street corner or town square used for speaking in public, even though the content was short, irrational and seemed impulsive. XHS joked:

Even "Tiananmen Square" is a flagged word, so you understand how important it is that we need another "square."

I understood his implication that the Tiananmen Square Protest in 1989 is taboo in public discussions. XHS thought that the state media's exclusiveness and authority was debunked by information exchanges on Weibo. Other interviewees used analogies such as a public blackboard, an information bazaar, or a free space for civilian voices, to describe Weibo's role in the society. CY commented:

Well, Weibo content is usually half accurate and half faked. You have to differentiate accuracy for yourself. However, conventional mass media must manipulate their content, so that 80% of their content may not be true.

In fact, almost all interviewees emphasized that they had their own criteria to differentiate the accuracy of Weibo feeds, since there was so much unchecked information such as exaggerated descriptions of government officers beating civilians to death. LL has worked in a social media app's marketing department. She observed:

Denigrating government was a "selling point" on Weibo. Feeds with such content would immediately receive increasing reposts and comments... If an issue reinforces negative images of the government, it would easily become trending... anything impossible to find on mass media...

Therefore, the popularity of Weibo was related to the distrust of conventional mass media outlets that were perceived as the government's mouthpieces. The social media site was seen as a platform to release political discontent. If Weibo was seen as an information bazaar, messages that denigrate the government could be understood as bestsellers in this bazaar. Furthermore, WX assumed that the overwhelming political resentment on Weibo actually manifested the public wisdom on interacting with the government:

According to Game Theory, how should we negotiate with a distrusted opponent? We pretend not to hear whatever they say. That is how people deal with the government.

He believed that both the milk formula case and the Apple case showed how people first made decisions based on economic interests, and then tried to legitimize their choices by

reconstructing stories. Also, WX regarded Weibo as a platform for the society to negotiate boundaries with the government, so the intense resentment on Weibo was an action meant to push the government to withdraw their power over the society.

My second set of questions addressed commercial penetration on Weibo. Most of my interviewees were working for commercial brands' marketing strategies. Their professional experiences forced them to think about this question. They did not simply make positive-or-negative judgments of commercialization but deeply contextualized the phenomena within the larger social background. For instance, XHS was an editor in a literature studio, and one of his tasks was to manage the studio's two Weibo accounts. He explained the purpose of having two accounts. The official account was used to introduce their products, merchandise and events. The other account was used to connect the studio with their fans by sharing personalized stories about its production process. The unofficial account would occasionally join trending topics discussions without obvious opinions. For instance, it reposted the Qinghua professor's comment on the missing piece of Apple's logo representing the brand's lack of conscience. The repost did not directly express the studio's standpoint on the issue but merely became a teaser for the studio's fans to express their own opinions.

XSH did not think it was inappropriate for Weibo to be a platform both for expression of opinion and for commercial promotion:

For ourselves, we do not exclude commercial sponsors but do not cater to the sponsors, either... The nation has been too serious for such a long time. There is too much serious content [on conventional mass media]... It is totally fine to have both entertaining and commercial content on Weibo. Our Weibo followers also like entertaining content such as jokes and self-mockery...

GYJ also assumed that the popularity of commercial content on Weibo was actually a progressive phenomenon:

Weibo is a platform integrating entertainment, information and expression... People have various cognitive capabilities, information resources, interests, and opinions... The best thing about Weibo is the freedom of choice. You can choose what you care about and what you are interested in and then share with your networks.

I then asked whether we should be concerned that commercial content might divert serious attention and discussion away from important social issues. GYJ replied:

No. That kind of concern in its essence still assumes that the public should or should not do something together. In fact, people should have the freedom to make their own choices. Anything emerging [on Weibo] is in response to market demand.

In other words, commercial Weibo feeds enriched content on this social media site, allowing users to practice free choice of information. This observation complemented previous assumptions in the literature that the rise of consumerism diverted political enthusiasm in Mainland China (Wei & Pan, 1999). On the surface, consumption was not directly related to political activities. However, the illusion of consumer-style autonomy and equality has been gradually changing people's expectations of government's role in the life of the society. This also explained the consistent resentment against government in the three different consumption topics on Weibo.

The third set of questions addressed Big Vs' roles on Weibo. As I introduced earlier, Sina Weibo is equipped with an identification verification system showing users' real information such as education level, job title, and so on. To get a verified account, users need to apply for it with required documents such as an ID card, a job offer letter, or cell phone numbers. A verified account will receive a "V" shown next to its handle. If it is a verified individual account, the "V" is in orange; if it is a verified account for an

institution, the “V” is shown in blue. “Big V” is Weibo slang for popular users with millions of followers. Those users in general had verified accounts.

One of my interviewees, Roger, has served in a digital advertising agency for social media campaigns for six years. He introduced me to the standards for the ad industry to categorize Big Vs. Those with more than 10 million followers were considered Big Vs. Famous Big Vs included LeeKaifu, YaoChen, and Panshiyi, who were mainly celebrities, business figures and public intellectuals. Roger also mentioned another group labeled as grassroots Big Vs. Those accounts were not verified and their real identities were mysterious. Zuoyeben and Liujishou, the two accounts who appeared in the previous cases, were typical grassroots Big Vs. In many cases, these accounts were managed by social media strategy firms and mainly posted jokes, comics and political satire. Therefore, Big Vs did not necessarily need verified accounts but must have a large number of followers. The “V” here was less about information but more about awareness. Among all my interviewees, only seven people were using verified Weibo accounts. Those with verified accounts mainly used Weibo for professional purposes; two of them were journalists. Verified accounts allow Weibo users to directly share opinions with their readers. XF, as the chief editor of a famous literature studio, was invited by Sina Weibo to have a verified account; this was different from the majority of cases in which users need to apply for the verification. Therefore, XT, the Shanghai-based creative entrepreneur commented:

Why was Sina Weibo so successful? One reason was that it invited many celebrities to join... Actually, Big Vs are Weibo’s content.

According to XT’s opinion, Weibo was about Big Vs. Those people decided Weibo trends. Leo, as an experienced social media strategist, also assumed that

networking was the key point of Weibo communication. Big Vs' online popularity was supported by their offline socioeconomic status. Pop stars with large numbers of fans would automatically receive attention on Weibo. Because of fans' curiosity, whatever those celebrities posted would immediately evoke gossip and comments.

Many other Big Vs were opinion leaders, such as LeeKaifu, Panshiyi and other business tycoons with access to information unknown to most people. Therefore, followers would keep track of their Weibo feeds to get information. LL has worked as an analyst in a firm researching public opinions on Weibo. Her observation of Weibo exactly echoed the findings of my pilot study:

When a sensation breaks out, mass media only report facts and Big Vs are eager to offer opinions and judgments... There are two levels of news timeliness. The first meaning of timeliness is to report earlier than others. The second meaning emphasizes interpretation timeliness. Web users care more about the interpretation timeliness: when a sensation breaks out, they immediately label it and interpret it ... Governments, corporations, media and individuals all want to be the first to define an issue.

Also, Leo pointed out that those tycoons were eager to be the embodiments of successful business leaders and to offer younger generations career guidance:

In reality, most young people are dissatisfied with their current lives and are looking for changes. Therefore, those users would like to follow those opinion leaders on Weibo.

WX, as a veteran journalist, believed that offering opinions and calling on actions made Big Vs different from conventional journalists. As a journalist, he was very cautious about expressing opinions and never directly called for action. He observed that Big Vs on Weibo were eager to do both. Additionally, Leo believed that the tradition of heroism in the collective society also determined the popularity of Big Vs:

The Chinese in general adore heroes. We want to have leaders. We are used to going with the flow. For example, where you go shopping or go for dinner. Where the crowds are, where the crowds would get bigger and bigger...

It was interesting that Leo used a consumption analogy to explain the popularity of Big Vs on Weibo. In fact, going with the flow was a characteristic mentioned by many interviewees when I asked about their understanding of Chinese consumers. As MS pointed out, if Weibo could be seen as a huge information market, each account – particularly verified accounts—could be seen as a personal brand. As AA assumed, each Big V was a personal medium with a crowd of followers, and the crowds were getting bigger and bigger. As LL commented, many Big Vs were good at quickly labeling social sensations, and then their followers spread the label all over Weibo.

Moreover, several interviewees reminded me to be aware of users' sophisticated attitudes toward Big Vs. On the one hand, users would like to follow Big Vs to receive information and opinions. On the other hand, they were also waiting for Big Vs to make fools of themselves. For instance, LL found an anti-elite manner in common Weibo users: "They are seeking the happiness of revenge by deconstructing idols." Based on his professional practice in the digital advertising industry, he also indirectly brought up his concerns about Big Vs' real popularity:

We are very cautious to invite Big Vs like LeeKaifu to endorse our clients' campaigns on Weibo. Of course, they are very expensive, but our major concern was that they are controversial.

In other words, advertisers realized that Big Vs' influence on Weibo might not always be positive. The large numbers of followers did not necessarily equal a large numbers of supporters.

While my interviews were ongoing, a social sensation related to Weibo Big Vs occurred. Several entrepreneurs who run firms managing grassroots Big V accounts were arrested for spreading rumors on Weibo. A verified Big V, Xuemanzi, was arrested for visiting prostitutes. Xuemanzi's profile displayed that he was an angel investor. On

Weibo, he used to have more than ten million followers and actively commented on trending topics. (One of his feeds was covered earlier in the analysis of the Hong Kong milk formula restriction topic.) As I pointed out before, his feed showed a strong dissatisfaction with the government. When I asked the interviewees their opinions about Xuemanzi's arrest, they all expressed a suspicion that it was part of the government's action to suppress Big Vs' public influence. AA's opinion was a representative example. He labeled himself as a liberal-oriented person but was not so radically liberal as Xuemanzi. However, he assumed that Xuemanzi's arrest was a political suppression:

Firstly, Xuemanzi as an angel investor played a significant role to push the Internet development in China. If he did visit prostitutes, it was not moral but was merely a problem of his personal morality. There was hearsay that even Martin Luther King had visited prostitutes...

JX, as the owner of a social media strategy firm, observed the incident's impact on Weibo:

As soon as those Big Vs become quiet, Weibo's influence has decreased...Sina Weibo's success relies on Big Vs ... Big Vs need common users' support. Meanwhile, common users receive content from Big Vs.

Therefore, this incident, for one thing, showed the government's crackdown on online public discussions, and for another thing indirectly demonstrated Big Vs' significance on Weibo. Big Vs had large numbers of followers who might not necessarily always support Big Vs, but the numbers were large enough to evoke intensive attention and controversy in a short period of time. Therefore, the government took action to constrain their influence on online opinions.

Previous literature and also many interviewees all assumed that Weibo was a platform for users to bypass the state's censorship. I was curious how to understand the



governmental intervention on Weibo. CW, a Taiwanese living in China for almost a decade, made his observation as a bystander:

Weibo seems to be an experimental place, a small-scale experimental platform to test public opinions. For a hypercritical example, if the Shanghai government were planning a freeway to connect two airports with a budget of 3 billion, the topic could be brought up to Weibo to see users' reaction... Smart governors could take advantage of it before making any important policies... Similar strategies can be used by both governments and commercial brands.

Other Mainland interviewees, such as WL and LYS, were not surprised by the governmental intervention on Weibo. Similar situations happened on other popular sites before. This reflects different governmental factions' attitudes about freedom of speech and also showed commercial powers pushing back against political power.

Overall, the clarification discussions with the interviewees helped me better understand emerging cultural themes and meanings in the case studies. The larger political and economic background – an authoritarian regime and powerful state capitalism – set up the general context of trending topics on Weibo. As I argued earlier, rather than make any rush to judgment about whether consumption packaged with neo-liberal values would be beneficial or deleterious to the society's transition or democratic progress, it was more valuable to interpret why and how people make meanings of participating in media rituals. Therefore, in the next chapter, I will conclude the entire study through a deeper discussion of Weibo and the Chinese consumerist society and further inductive analysis of social media's cultural meaning.

## CHAPTER IX

### CONCLUSION

The central point of this dissertation is to argue for the use of a cultural paradigm in the study of social media phenomena. I chose Weibo – a Chinese micro-blogging site – as an example. Based on field theory, the study explores unspoken rules (doxa), significant cultural meanings, and crucial agents in the Weibo field. By analyzing three consumerism topics trending on Weibo, I elaborate the relationship between social media phenomena and the macro social context. Three sets of research questions were proposed for the research purposes: First, what are the values that make certain events “trendingworthy” on Weibo? How are they reflected through trending topics? Second, what do Weibo doxa illustrate about Chinese consumerist values? How are the enduring cultural values in Chinese society expressed through consumerism in Weibo rituals? And third, who are the crucial agents in Weibo rituals? To what extent are they similar to/different from journalists in the conventional journalism field?

Based on field theory and through the lens of consumerism, the study discusses Weibo as a Chinese cultural product in the global trend of social networking and neo-liberalization. The Weibo field interacts with the overall political and economic environment of Chinese society. Consumerism functions as a powerful ideology which integrates fragmented social forces that then negotiate with the authoritarian state. Freedom of choice and equality in the market are two doxa found in this field. Prosumers consistently rely on these two values to make sense of emerging social issues and make certain issues trend in the field. As Weibo rituals, these trending topics present conflicts, combine neo-liberalism, consumerism and nationalism, and manifest the negotiation of

prosumers' political, economic and cultural identities. Neo-liberal elites become crucial agents leading rituals in this field. They thus gain economic capital in the Weibo field, based on their individual career success. They also gain social capital, as symbolized by their millions of followers. Finally, the liberal elites gain cultural capital, which is accumulated through their interpretive speed in trending discussions as they construct narratives based on the two Weibo doxa (Figure 2).

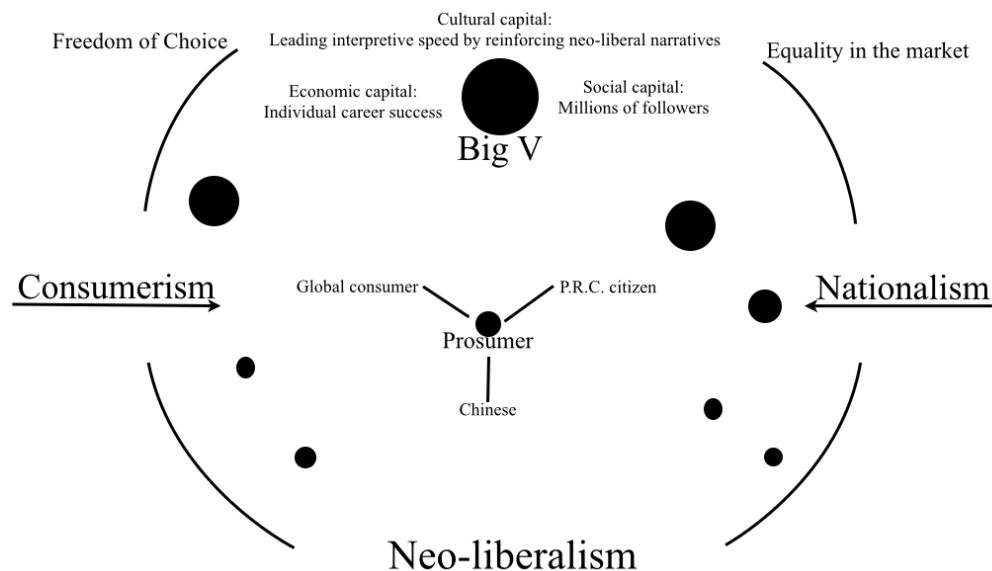


Figure 2. Doxa, Significant Values and Crucial Agents in the Weibo Field

At first glance, the three high-profile issues discussed in this study appear to involve different debates and different actors. However, a closer analysis found that a neo-liberal orientation consistently emerged in trending discussions. No matter whether

the concern was about babies' milk formula, Apple's after-sale services, or earthquake relief donations, the consistent focus is on free choice and equal rights in global markets. The authoritarian government was repeatedly criticized in the three cases, because its attached perceptions conflict with the Weibo field's value of freedom and equality.

The value of freedom of choice is reflected in prosumers' perception of the site itself. Using Weibo – regardless of the specific content consumed – is a practice in which information is chosen. Because of the existing political control of mass media production, the variety of content from prosumers presents a perceived freedom to choose information. Even though Weibo includes rumors, entertaining gossip, and useless advertisements, the variety presents a level of freedom. Topic trends evolve with prosumers' participation. It is each individual user's right and responsibility to create, select, differentiate, and disseminate information. Even though there is political control on Weibo and it is not free from censorship, prosumers believe that they at least earn opportunities to debunk the state media's propaganda, to express dissatisfaction towards the government, and to expose governmental corruption. Some interviewees even mentioned consuming entertaining content as a way to resist governmental power over people's personal lives. This utopian view of social media is not unfamiliar in the Western neo-liberal context, but it is more valued when it is contextualized in the history and the reality of media censorship in China. Or, more broadly, it is contextualized in conflicts between the authoritarian regime and the growing civil society. The Weibo field is fundamentally supported by the belief in freedom of choice.

Moreover, as an online platform, Weibo allows Chinese consumers to reach out to global markets when they do not feel as if they are benefitting from the government's

trade protection. On Weibo, they expressed anger at being unable to purchase baby milk formula from overseas markets. They did not accept the state media's criticism of Apple, since they enjoyed the freedom to choose its products. They trusted charities with international backgrounds instead of state-affiliated ones. Sharing consumption experiences of foreign milk formula, defending an American high-tech brand, promoting an American charitable organization – all of these practices on Weibo repeatedly reinforce the existing consumerist orientation of worshipping the West (Wei & Pan, 1999). In contrast to 15 years ago, such orientation on Weibo is less about lifestyle and more about the political system. It is noticeable that in all three cases, the U.S. is the most-often mentioned example in a comparison between China and the West. In the Weibo field, the embrace of globalization can be more accurately understood as the embrace of Americanization. The American political system is seen as a foundation to ensure livelihood standards, technology innovation and transparent public services. The problems of American capitalism are dispensable in Weibo discussions. The mythical narratives of American capitalism essentially construct a utopian image of the government's role in a free market.

Moreover, Weibo also allows domestic non-governmental institutions to share their voices in social rituals. This is particularly reflected in the micro-charity platform, which presents Weibo prosumers with more donation options than RCSC. It may sound contradictory that in the milk formula cases, domestic brands did not receive any support. Actually, the collective memory that the government has been protecting the industry since the previous poison scandal created the government-related label for the domestic milk industry. Weibo prosumers categorized domestic formula together with products

from state-owned industries, such as electricity, power, and petroleum. Because those products are seen as pre-selected and protected by the government, they do not fit into the Weibo field's value of free choice. Likewise, any product seen as "non-governmental" becomes a selling point on Weibo.

The Weibo field's emphasis on free choice is associated with the demand for equality in the market. The value of equality is another doxa that explains the intense resentment of government on Weibo, because the government is blamed for causing unequal status in market competition. In the Weibo field, "the government" does not only refer to the political entity, but also includes state-sponsored institutions and individuals. Although state-owned corporations were not relevant to all three trending topics, prosumers repeatedly mentioned those corporations to reinforce their dissatisfaction with governmental intervention. Those corporations were criticized for providing low-quality products with high prices. Because the government endorses or even directly creates the advanced status of these corporations in the market, their monopolization is regarded as illegitimate in the Weibo field. In contrast, trending discussions did not raise any questions about international giants such as Apple on monopolizing the global market. As interviewees pointed out, monopolization via market competition is reasonable and acceptable in China's context, because consumers have a more intuitive perception of state monopolization. Moreover, in Apple's case, the high-tech giant's silence was praised as resistance against the Chinese government. It is very doubtful that the corporation would really like to displease the government of its second-largest market. Regardless of the corporation's real intention, the mythical illusion about

Apple demonstrates the perception that international business giants are powerful enough to act as a counterweight to the authoritarian regime.

In addition, inequality due to state monopolization is associated with the lack of public monitoring. As a result, state-sponsored institutions such as RCSC and CCTV lost their credibility on Weibo. In regard to RCSC, prosumers found similarities between the charity and the government. Donations to RCSC are similar to taxes collected by the government, because in neither case is the disbursement and reallocation transparent to the public. Also, corruption and sexual scandals related to RCSC merely reinforced the negative perception of governmental corruption. Although Weibo discussions cannot completely change this inequality, the collective memory of RCSC's scandals repeatedly reminds prosumers of problems caused by the state's unfair favor toward the charity institution.

When CCTV – the state-owned media – appeared in the Weibo field, its perceived image conflicted with the field's value of equality on two levels of meaning. For one thing, it plays a role as the government's mouthpiece and assists the government in creating an unequal market environment. Therefore, when the network initiated the Weibo campaign against Apple, its narratives of Apple's discriminatory service did not fit into Weibo prosumers' memory of Apple's legacy as a winner in global market competition. Again, in the Weibo field, results from market competition are acceptable. In contrast, it is unacceptable for the state media to take down the international high-tech giant's success in China while ignoring domestic state-supporting monopoly corporations' violation of consumer rights. For another thing, CCTV's influence in the domestic media industry is also due to the state's unfair support. Therefore, the network

is not perceived as a watchdog for consumer rights, but is instead accused of blackmailing brands for advertising revenue. Therefore, it is not surprising that CCTV failed to resonate with Weibo prosumers in the trending discussion. On the contrary, the “Publish around 8:20” incident quickly fit into the existing negative perception of the state-owned media and was immediately amplified to reinforce such a perception.

Thus, to answer the first set of research questions, freedom and equality were found to be two doxa which made certain events trendingworthy in the Weibo field. In consumerism topics, freedom and equality were manifested in neo-liberal demands for the freedom of choice and equality in market competition. Significance of a free market environment without governmental intervention is repeated to construct meanings of trending issues. As Weibo communication features fast interpretive speed, the collective memory of past state monopolies is used to make sense of current consumerism crises and to justify the demand for future liberalization. Conceptually, the study manifests how Weibo doxa are analogous to journalism doxa. The doxa of free choice and equal status provide a template for prosumers to craft unexpected social events into a storyline that fits with other prosumers’ expectations. The enduring neo-liberal values quickly construct interpretive connections among prosumers, which then leads to a collective process in which unfamiliar issues become familiar stories. As a result, Weibo becomes the field for prosumers to practice shared beliefs about market competition in order to catch up to the global flow and to resist the powerful regime. Weibo doxa do not only reflect a neo-liberal emphasis on technological solutions as governmentality in the digital culture, but also reinforce the meaning of liberalization demands in contrast to the larger authoritarian power in the context.



The second set of research questions focuses on contextualization of Weibo doxa within the Chinese consumerist society. As previous literature has pointed out, consumerism is a cultural expression associated with identity formation. In contrast, nationalism is found in enduring cultural narratives that manifest Chinese society's collective tradition. The Weibo field is based upon neo-liberal values within the larger background of globalization. When neo-liberal values meet society's long-term nationalism narratives in the Weibo field, trending topics can be understood as a negotiation of prosumers' political, economic and cultural identities. The economic identity as consumers in global markets is constructed and practiced via trending topic discussions by reinforcing values of freedom and equality. Embracing the economic identity is associated with a rejection of the political identity as P.R.C citizens, since freedom and equality—the two values attached to the economic identity—are missing in their political identity. The economic identity is also integrated to construct the boundary of their cultural identity as Chinese.

In the case of Hong Kong's milk formula restriction, Weibo prosumers realized that their identity as global consumers was denied by the regulation. Their freedom of choosing milk formula from a worldwide market had already been restricted by the Mainland government's trade protection, and then even further restricted by Hong Kong's customs policy. As a result, they did not perceive that they had equal status in the global market. Prosumers on Weibo, no matter whether they actually had a demand for milk formula, shared this crisis. Therefore, the issue became a trending topic for prosumers to claim their economic identity. As a result, e-commerce channels became an alternative way to reach out to the foreign market. The Hong Kong government was

criticized as practicing trade protectionism. In addition, political meanings became attached to the economic identities of prosumers. The trust of foreign milk formula was rooted in the belief in the Western political system. Distrust of domestic milk formula was associated with dissatisfaction with state-monopolized products and eventually constructed a narrative criticizing political power's influence on the market. In other words, practicing the role of global consumer led to the demand for more rights under the role of citizen. In the Weibo ritual, meanings of the economic identity were seen as interchangeable in constructing meanings of the political identity. Moreover, the economic identity was also instrumental in making sense of the cultural identity. Though Hong Kong's Cantonese language and post-colonial history were not shared by the Mainland, the shared market became a legitimate reason to debate Hong Kong's "Chineseness." Those who tried to naturalize Hong Kong's Chineseness emphasized how Hong Kong had benefited from the Mainland market. Those who refused to bind Hong Kong to the Mainland then denied such benefits. Nevertheless, the consumption connection was the central point in the argument. Therefore, the sense of economic identity prioritizes the cultural identity and then the political identity in the Weibo ritual. Such an assumption can also be found in the other two cases.

The trending discussions of CCTV's battle with Apple more obviously manifested the priority of economic identity as global consumers over the cultural identity of Chinese and the political identity as Chinese citizens. The state media's original narratives were designed to raise a conflict between Chinese consumers' economic identity and cultural identity and to emphasize the significance of the political identity: Chinese consumers were discriminated against by Apple and the state was powerful

enough to fight against the high-tech giant for the Chinese. Although CCTV raised the issue from the perspective of equality in the global market, this story essentially delivered a message that Chinese consumers needed the state's protection to challenge the American monopoly and to receive equal status in the global market. The story fit into the state's consistent neo-liberal belief in building up a market connected with the global but controlled by the government. It repeated the myth of the regime's success in saving the nation against foreigners' invasion – not in military battle as decades ago but in today's economic battle. It set political identity as the foundation of economic identity and cultural identity. Because such a story was not coherent with the ongoing narratives in the Weibo field, it failed to resonate with Weibo prosumers. The storyline was reversed when the issue became a ritual in the Weibo field. The “Publish around 8:20” incident quickly became a turning point that reconstructed a storyline based on the Weibo doxa.

It is vital to understand why the economic identity was still prioritized even though Chinese consumers indeed received different services from Apple. Neo-liberalism emphasizes the market's self-correcting mechanism. Consumers believe that at least they have the autonomy to correct misbehaviors in the market by boycotting certain brands. In contrast, as citizens under the authoritarian regime, they do not have any influence to correct the government's misconduct. In other words, they can somehow decide whether or not they want to be Apple's consumers but they cannot decide about their rights regarding their political identity. Therefore, the state media's campaign against Apple evoked a crisis with the implication that their economic identity was being threatened by the state's political power. Thus, they would defend their economic identity, which

allows them to enjoy freedom and equality. The state's failure in protecting consumer rights related to daily needs was amplified to further discredit the state media's credibility. As neo-liberal nationalism always refuses to equate the state with the country, and rejects giving credit to the regime for the salvation of the nation, the state media's packaging of cultural identity with political identity was debunked. In other words, Weibo prosumers did not perceive a serious cultural identity crisis in this case, because such a crisis was believed to have been a result of political conspiracies. As a result, the nationalist narrative was not accumulated in trending discussions. Again, this Weibo ritual made prosumers favor their economic identity as global consumers over the other two forms of identity.

The micro-charity case was another ritual to practice the priority of the economic identity. RCSC is a governmental institution that dominates the Mainland's public charity industry. Disaster relief donations used to be like a behavior under the political identity. People did not have many other choices and had limited access to trace the disbursement of donations. The Guo Meimei incident fit into the enduring negative perception of governors/public servants and the overall political system. As Meimei's affiliation with RCSC was mysterious to the public throughout, the incident reinforced the existing resentment of governmental corruption and low transparency. Therefore, the incident became the collective memory for Weibo prosumers to make sense of the state-affiliated charity's poor performance in public interest and to argue for the necessity to have government step down from the charity industry.

Additionally, the phenomenon involving Hong Kong's legislative rejection of the relief donation did not raise intense questions of Hong Kong's Chineseness, and also

manifested the rejection of political identity in the Weibo ritual. Since the legislature's main concern was corruption and misappropriation of donations, this concern was consistent with the mythical narrative of governmental charity. Because Hong Kongers took the same side to resist the central government, they were seen as being on the same team as Weibo prosumers in this ritual. Beliefs which went against the authoritarian state were not perceived as rejecting the overall nationalist identity. Therefore, the rejection did not involve cultural identity conflicts. Hong Kong's rejection was acceptable.

Meanwhile, the emergence of micro-charities and the call for transparent charities essentially caused a shift; engagement in public goods became a right under the economic identity rather than an obligation under the political identity. People should enjoy freedom to decide where their donations go and how their donations would be disbursed. Market competition, rather than governmental intervention, could ensure donors' quasi-consumer rights. Also, as commercialized charity is commonly practiced in Western liberal societies, it is believed to be successful in disbursing social aid.

In general, Weibo doxa illustrate the Chinese consumerist orientation toward worshipping the West. Twenty years ago, worship of the Western lifestyle revolved around consumerism, but today such an orientation is embedded with political meanings. Western brands that succeeded in global market competition were expected to be powerful enough against China's authoritarian regime. The preference for overseas products can eventually be traced to a utopian illusion of Western liberal capitalism. The neo-liberal political system is seen as the foundation for ensuring production and quality.

Such neo-liberal belief about the West and global market competition seemed to conflict with the enduring nationalist emphasis in the society. As a result, in the Weibo

field, trending topics became rituals to negotiate prosumers' identities from economic, political and cultural dimensions. The economic identity as consumer in the global market most closely matches the Weibo doxa of freedom and equality, so that it is prioritized among the three identities. The political identity as citizen under the authoritarian regime was the poorest fit within the Weibo doxa. Consumers can practice their values by making consumption decisions and engaging in global markets. As citizens, however, they have few opportunities to impact governmental decisions. They can only passively accept policies and regulations but have little power to resist political forces. Thus, this identity receives consistent rejection in the Weibo rituals. Moreover, in the Weibo rituals, prosumers repeatedly divest the cultural identity as Chinese from the political identity and attempt to integrate cultural identity with economic identity. In other words, the boundary of "Chinese" becomes blurred but is incorporated into the embracing of globalization. "Un-Chinese" is used to label actions that counter the trend of sharing the international market, because catching up to the global flow in economic competition is also a way to achieve national salvation. Therefore, the rising consumerism should not be simplified as the regime's political manipulative strategy. Instead, consumerism is a powerful ideology used to integrate social forces in the post-reform era. To slightly modify the previous assumption of Chinese media struggling between "the money line and the Party line" (Zhao, 1998, 2003, 2008a, 2008b), the Weibo field demonstrates social media's reliance on the money line in order to push the Party line.

The last sets of research questions address crucial agents in the Weibo field. As findings show, neo-liberal elites, labeled as Big V, are playing important roles in the

Weibo rituals. Most of these elites are celebrities or business figures, who have achieved career success. Many of those business figures are devoting themselves to high-tech areas and new media industries. Their social statuses ensure their social capital, which manifests as large numbers of followers on Weibo. This transformation from economic capital to social capital demonstrates the field's recognition of business achievements and is consistent with the neo-liberal values of individual success and technological progress. More importantly, those popular Big Vs are engaging in trending discussions and are adept at offering opinions which fit into Weibo's neo-liberal values. Their active engagement creates expectations for other prosumers who are waiting for the Big Vs' comments. In other words, the appearance of Big Vs in trending discussions becomes part of Weibo rituals. Their neo-liberal opinions lay the foundation for the accumulation of cultural capital. Therefore, the significance of "prosumers" includes two levels of meanings. For one thing, the "pro-" part emphasizes content producers' non-governmental characteristics. For another thing, the "-sumer" part values content consumers' freedom of choosing non-governmental messages. Overall, "prosumer" in the context of Chinese society symbolizes agents who follow the Weibo doxa in prioritizing their economic identity.

For instance, in the milk formula case, Big Vs called for a market more open to foreign brands, and repeated the collective memory of the government's negative roles in market competition. In the Apple case, Big Vs listed problems of state-monopoly corporations and government supervision to argue state monopolies as more threatening to consumer rights. In the earthquake case, it was also the Big Vs who created the micro-charity channels and endorsed non-governmental charity organizations. In return, Big Vs'

social and cultural capital turns into economic capital. Their influence attracts commercial powers, so they are chosen to be spokespersons in commercial Weibo campaigns. In general, as influential agents in the Weibo field, Big Vs' three types of capital (social, cultural and economic) are interchangeable and mutually supportive. Thus, while participating in Weibo rituals, the different types of capital can be accumulated.

As much previous literature has pointed out, social media competes with conventional journalism. Such competition is more in terms of interpretation speed than reporting speed. When a sensational issue breaks out, interpretations which resonate with other prosumers are quickly disseminated. As this study shows, in the Weibo field, "non-governmental" has proved to be an effective target for Big Vs to attract attention. Even further, sometimes they would directly point out the overall political system's problems. In China's political context, conventional media are unable to construct such narratives. This is particularly true for state-owned media, which are seen as the regime's mouthpiece. State media's interpretations are believed to represent government interests, so they do not match Weibo doxa. As a result, Big Vs received attention by simply refuting the state media's narratives.

In addition, conventional journalism's professionalism restricts journalists from directly expressing opinions and calling for action. As the previous literature found, in Asian contexts, reporters actively coordinate with elites to promote agendas that they believe to be beneficial for the society's long-term progress. Those Big Vs in many cases are the elites with whom journalists coordinated in the past, but who are now able to deliver their opinions directly to the public. Free of professional restrictions, Big Vs do



not need to use objective tones, acting as by-standers; instead, they can now boldly express their points of view to emotionally or rationally evoke other prosumers' responses. When it is necessary, they can directly call for action to solve certain social problems. The micro-charity platform was a good example. Therefore, Big Vs enjoy more power of initiative than conventional journalists in the Weibo rituals. By taking advantage of their social and cultural capital, Big Vs can not only disseminate neo-liberal beliefs but also immediately execute actions that push back against the government's control of the society. This whole process illustrates the neo-liberal belief of non-political governmentality.

In China's context, it is unavoidable for Big Vs to face both political and commercial pressures as conventional media do. Some of them indeed coordinated with the state media's program. Some of them got arrested. From a pessimistic point of view, Weibo is not a completely free-speech environment but is still subject to governmental intervention and surveillance. From an optimistic point of view, the governmental intervention is exposed through public monitoring. When a feed is removed for censorship purposes, there will be a "corpus" left on the original prosumer's homepage and all other reposts, stating that administrator has deleted the feed. When a Big V "disappears" on Weibo, this is unusual and is thus noticed by other prosumers and leads to public attention. In contrast, when conventional media face political pressure, in many cases, the media would have to stay low-key so people outside the institution would have little access to this knowledge. Thus, Big Vs set examples or even serve as role models for other prosumers to emulate and to play with rules in this ritual field.

The field is a platform on which people with neo-liberal beliefs can integrate and negotiate. To gain more social and cultural capital in this field, a prosumer should have real social accomplishments, such as personal striving and success. The verified icon with identity information and the number of followers symbolize a prosumer's social capital in the field. Active engagement and opinions showing coordination with the government in trending discussions are keys to accumulating cultural capital. As neo-liberal Big Vs' interpretations more easily resonate with prosumers across the site, beliefs such as a more free and equal market with smaller government would be repeatedly practiced as doxa in the ritual field. What can be foreseen is that the commercial society is accumulating more power to bargain with the authoritarian regime.

Overall, this study explores Weibo as a social field for prosumers to practice economic identities by reinforcing neo-liberal values, to reject political identity by negotiating societal boundaries with the regime, and to reform cultural identity by sharing markets. When I was doing the interviews, several participants kindly suggested to me that Weibo was becoming out-of-fashion and I might consider studying another social media called WeChat, which is an instant messenger app with social sharing functions. I was truly thankful that they cared about my research and wanted to share with me the latest trend in the social media market. However, as a scholar, I would remind my academic readers here again that the central argument of this dissertation is about using a cultural paradigm to understand the relationship between social media and the larger social context. Weibo and the Chinese transitional society were only examples to illustrate and explore the paradigm. A solid conceptual framework connects dialogue between the context and the larger research field. The findings specifically about Weibo

and China may not be applicable to other social media or to other societies, but the findings can be applied to explore other media in other social contexts. For example, scholars could apply the findings to social media in other post-socialist countries to discuss whether consumerism plays a similar role in the integration of different social forces and in the formation of a civil society. Likewise, to understand social media in other societies in Asia, scholars can also apply findings from this study to explore conflicts and combinations of neo-liberalism and collectivism. In general, to apply this study's findings to different media phenomena and social contexts, scholars need to focus on (a) the relationship between media and the larger society and (b) the dynamic hierarchy within the field. A media field should be explored as a social institution for different social forces using reinforced values to construct "game rules." Therefore, we can think through existing media's roles and enduring historical narratives in the society to start understanding emerging media fields. By examining high-profile issues, general storylines, key debates, and crucial agents, scholars can illustrate a general picture of the ways in which three types of capital (economic, social and cultural) work together and influence one another in the field, so that we are able to further illustrate dynamic interactions in the society.

Scholars need to go beyond the limitation of a normative paradigm that makes judgments about whether media are doing right or wrong for democracy. We also need to challenge technological determinist assumptions which state that models, indexes or norms concluded from Western context are applicable across cultures. This study illustrates details of the ways in which people negotiate political and economic conflicts in daily life settings and does not jump to any harsh judgments about whether Weibo

could promote China's future democratization. Also, the study demonstrates how people use consumerist values to make sense of their political and cultural identities in the particular social context and does not impose any decontextualized presumptions about political and commercial manipulation in consumerism. Based on these rich details, we can have a better understanding of consumerist culture's influence on social media in the background of the globalizing economy.

Methodologically, the study provides an example for scholars who are interested in social media research but lack big data. In the growing fever for big data, it becomes harder and more expensive for scholars to access comprehensively large data sets of online phenomena. This is particularly true for graduate students; they are enthusiastic and sensitive to emerging phenomena but also in many cases lack resources and funding support. The study started with testing the research idea with one Weibo feed, expanded to a three-month online observation, then focused on three cases and finally supplemented the data with 34 in-depth interviews. Based on the cultural paradigm as a solid conceptual framework, field theory as a theoretical foundation, and e-ethnography with multiple research techniques, researchers can efficiently collect triangulated materials to complete the hermeneutic circle (Debessay et al, 2008). By analyzing those materials within a specific context, scholars are able to reach grounded conclusions. Overall, as long as conceptual foundations and methodology can support each other, limited data should not be an insurmountable barrier to digital media studies.

The study provides another conceptual framework, as well as methodology choices, for scholars engaged in further study of similar topics and areas. Also for scholars who are devoting to Chinese media and the transitional society, the findings

allow them to further test consumerism and social media's roles in the development of a mature civil society, particularly when there are larger data sets available. Likewise, the study discusses Weibo from the lens of consumerism. Scholars may find other trendingworthy values on Weibo if they take other points of view. That will also enhance further understanding of the social media.

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