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**Harmonious communitarianism or a rational public sphere: A content  
analysis of the differences between comments on news stories on Weibo and  
Facebook**

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## **Abstract**

In studying online political communication in China, many researchers apply theories generated in the West (particularly that of the public sphere) without questioning their applicability in the Chinese context. Others argue that new theories must be generated from the ground up, often basing these theories on traditional Chinese philosophies. However, the applicability of these approaches remains unproven. This research uses a content analysis to compare comments on news stories on Chinese and Western social media sites. It finds that there is little evidence to support either the use of public sphere theory in China or the use of traditional conceptions of Eastern styles of communication. Chinese netizens were no more subtle or harmonious (if anything they were more divisive) and were less likely to talk with others, attempt to understand others' opinions, or attempt to work toward consensus or resolution. Based on these findings, I propose that future research should attempt to build more appropriate theories based on an understanding of how political ideas are actually produced, transmitted and received in society, rather than continuing to apply foreign or ancient theoretical frameworks without a critical interrogation of their applicability in their context of application.

## **Keywords**

online political communication; China; Weibo; social networking sites; public sphere; Asian theories of communication

## **Introduction**

The Internet was invented in the U.S. and it was in a Western context that this technology developed and matured. As part of its development, key U.S. values, such as privacy and freedom of expression, were built into the code and structure of the Internet (Norris & Inglehart, 2009). This discourse of the Internet as a freedom-spreading technology has been accepted by the majority of Internet users across the world, regardless of the conditions of the technology's use (Bolsover, Dutton, Law, & Dutta, 2014). However, despite the influence of Western nations in shaping Internet values, users in these countries no longer dominate the global Internet. China surpassed the US in 2008 to become the world's largest population of Internet users and users in Asia now make up almost half of the world's Internet population.

Despite these huge shifts in the composition of the global Internet population, communications scholarship has been slow to shift away from its Western focus. Efforts to de-westernize scholarship are often hampered by a lack of home-grown or area-specific theories of communication (Dissanayake, 2009). This has led some scholars to uncritically apply communication theories generated in the West in other contexts and others to reject existing scholarship in favour of calls for the need to build an entirely new body of knowledge for each area under study. Others simply produce atheoretical work that, thus, is highly exploratory and descriptive, rather than explanatory.

All three of these approaches are problematic. It is likely to lead to spurious conclusions if existing theories are applied uncritically without an interrogation of whether they are appropriate in contexts very different to that of their generation. But equally, in a globalized world interacting via the Internet, national and regional populations will not be so entirely different from their oft-studied Western

counterparts as to justify throwing out existing theories to build new ones from the ground up. Empirically based, comparative research is, thus, a necessary part of the effort to de-westernize communications scholarship in that it can establish in what ways Internet users in non-Western contexts differ from previously studied populations. Knowledge of these differences and similarities can then be used to inform the application and modification of existing theories.

One area in which this problem is particularly acute is in relation to the study of Internet-based political activities in China. Despite the enormous popularity and importance of this topic, research in this area is often highly descriptive and based on of a handful of prominent case studies or topics. When normative theoretical lenses are applied, most scholars use the concept of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989) and of rational deliberation, despite the fact that these theories were developed to describe communication in a democratic context. While there have been many developments in public sphere theory since Habermas (e.g. Fraser, 1992; Kluge & Negt, 2016; Mouffe, 2005), research that attempts to find a Chinese public sphere tends to align with the traditional Habermasian conception, and continues to hold rational, independent deliberation; ideal role taking; and autonomy from state and economic powers as normative ideals.

The use of public sphere theory is often justified by authors arguing that it can be usefully applied in China, despite its authoritarian system, (Jiang, 2009) or the fact that these terms are used by Chinese Internet users and academics (G. Yang & Calhoun, 2007). However, scholars often enthusiastically find an incipient public sphere in Chinese cyberspace, without discussing how China's political and social context might affect the application of this theory (e.g. Zhou, Chan, & Peng, 2008).

One attempt to reconcile the popularity of the deliberative ideal with China's political context has been the concept of authoritarian deliberation, which was put forward by He (2006) as part of "*The search for deliberative democracy in China*" (Leib & He, 2006). He argued that the Chinese government was driving a process of democratization because, as He and Warren (2011) argue in a later article, deliberation serves to provide information to the government, to prevent policy errors, and to increase governmental authority and legitimacy.

However, others argue that the generation of new theories of political communication in China is necessary to get rid of the baggage associated with public sphere theory (Huang, 1993) or due to latent differences in Chinese netizens' approaches to communication (G. M. Chen, 2009; Shao & Zhang, 2013). Of the scholars who look to generate or update existing theories many look toward traditional Chinese philosophies and traditional conceptions of differences between Eastern and Western styles of communication (e.g. S. Yang, Xu, & Qi, 2013) for their starting material.

However these approaches are premature, for it remains to be established whether the online political speech of Chinese netizens reflects the Western-generated normative ideals of public sphere theory or, equally, whether traditional conceptions of Eastern or Asian styles of communication are relevant when examining online speech in modern China. It is, of course, true that the existence of a discrepancy between the nature of observed political speech and a particular normative ideal does not mean that the theory is not appropriate; this is exactly the point of normative theories, to outline a framework of how things ought to be rather than how they are. However, the tendency to set out to "search for deliberative democracy in China" based on the conception of a Habermasian public sphere risks

missing important indications of other models of or developments in political speech because it is too fixed on a particular end goal.

In an influential article, Freedman lays out three ways of constructing political theories. The first two are working from normative ideals and charting the history of political ideas. He criticizes both these approaches as taking “insufficient account of the ordinary and normal manifestations of political thought in any given society” (2008, p. 197). The third way of constructing political theory that Freedman proposes is to work from an understanding of how political ideas are actually produced, transmitted and received in society, and what individuals actually do and think about politics. This third way can take into account the context of speech and avoid importing normative ideals that are not appropriate or not shared by individuals in the context under consideration.

### **The importance of context**

Many early approaches to Internet research took a perspective that later came to be called technological determinism. The Internet, as well as other related communication technologies, were seen as (almost) automatically leading to certain social outcomes due to their structures and affordances. In relation to political speech and political power, the Internet was seen as a democratizing force that would bring down authoritarian regimes; this perspective was encapsulated in then US President Bill Clinton’s famous quote that China’s attempt to control the Internet was akin to trying to nail jello<sup>1</sup> to a wall (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000, p. 407).

However, this technologically deterministic optimism understated three important facts: firstly, that the Internet, although constrained by code and

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<sup>1</sup> Jell-O is the brand name for a popular American brand of jello or gelatinous dessert that would be impossible, in its natural state, to nail to a wall.

structure, is a relatively impartial tool that can be used just as easily by non-democratic forces as democratic ones; secondly, that the use and effects of technologies are highly dependent on their context of use; and thirdly, that the Internet is far from a monolithic entity and that different platforms and modes of use will have vastly different affordances and social effects.

More recent approaches to studying the political and social effects of the Internet have focused on the interactions of code and context (Kitchin & Dodge, 2011) and several scholars have started to use actor network theory (Latour, 2005), which approaches Internet spaces and platforms as nonhuman actors, to investigate how users and (so-called) non-human actors work together as a system (e.g. Poell, de Kloet, & Zeng, 2014).

However despite this recognition of the importance of context in understanding Internet usage and effects, there has been little empirical or theoretical examination of whether the political theories being applied to the study of the Chinese Internet are appropriate to their context.

### **Political speech in China and the West**

Western normative frameworks for political speech took a deliberative turn in the early 1990s, although these ideas are associated with earlier works by Rawls (1971) and Habermas (1962). This deliberative ideal emphasizes that democratic legitimacy should be based, not just on representation but, on rational deliberation by citizens (Dryzek, 2002). Following this trend, communication theorists have generally prioritized a deliberative model of political speech, with communitarian and liberal individualist models sometimes also used in contrast (Dahlberg, 2001; D. Freelon, 2010; D. Freelon, 2013).



The role of political speech under a deliberative model is to allow participants to share and be exposed to a diversity of views before drawing conclusions based on the evidence given. Despite the fact that Western online political speech has been generally accepted as falling far short of the deliberative ideal (See, for instance, Dahlberg, 2001), this is still generally held up as the idealized normative framework. This ideal is also often applied to online political speech in China, without a justification of its appropriateness (Li, 2010; Wang & Hong, 2010; Zhou et al., 2008).

However in both Western and Chinese contexts, the simplicity and rigidity of the Habermasian public sphere has been problematized. As Fraser argues, the concept of the public sphere is “indispensable to critical social theory and democratic practice... (but that) the specific form in which Habermas elaborated it is unsatisfactory” (1992, p. 57). Drawing from these critiques, many scholars have moved toward the concept of multiple public spheres, some stronger than others; *ad hoc* public spheres and issue publics; and the concept of civil society, as a looser and less prescriptive way of describing the intersection of state apparatuses and that which grows out of society.

In his influential work on “*The Power of the Internet in China*,” Guobin Yang notes how terms such as public sphere, discourse space, and civil society are emerging as new discourses related to online activism in modern China (2009, p. 217). However, as Huang (1993) argues, both the concepts of the public sphere and civil society are value-laden terms that defy importation into new contexts and rely on a dicotomous oppositon between the state and society that may not be appropriate in China.

Traditional Chinese philosophies, as well as more modern traditions, prescribe different roles for political speech than is found in the deliberative model. In dynastic China, the Mandate of Heaven that gave emperors their right to rule rested on the support of the people, obtained through acting benevolently and providing for the people's livelihood (Perry, 2008). Under this structure, the role of political speech was to raise awareness when these obligations are not being fulfilled. Although Confucian philosophy recognized that the power of governments should be derived from the people, it did not provide structures by which this power could be realized (He, 2010). This lack of formal structures forced discontent into extra-institutional channels (Hung, 2011) and led to a state-citizen relationship based on ad hoc actions, such as traveling to the capital to make one's case to the Emperor.

In Maoist and post-Mao China, more formal structures have been created to allow citizens to feed their opinions into government policies; however, acceptable speech is highly prescribed and allowed only within the confines of Party dominance of both political power and the political agenda (He & Warren, 2011). The boundaries of what constitutes acceptable political speech in modern China are opaque leading to uncertainty, self-censorship and uneven application; however, this also results in a negotiation of the boundaries of acceptable speech between the state and citizens (Stern & Hassid, 2012).

In attempting to construct a normative framework for the effects of the Internet on Chinese political communication by combining theories of democracy with traditional Chinese philosophy, S. Yang et al. (2013) focus on the role of the Internet as a source of information, particularly in promoting an "awareness of (the) government' improper or incompetent handling of sociopolitical issues" (p.

22). Similarly, Guobin Yang finds that spontaneous online protests in China rest on a sense of moral calling with the spontaneity in direct proportion to the (perceived) gravity of the injustice (2009, p. 36).

While S. Yang et al.'s efforts to move past public sphere theory in evaluating political speech in China are sorely needed, the question of what normative frameworks are evidenced in the way that Chinese netizens actually speak online has yet to be addressed. Given the huge differences between the present day and the time of generation of these theories and, in particular, the extent of the opening, modernization and internationalization in China in the past decade, it is important to think critically about whether these ancient Chinese theories prove might prove any more relevant than imported Western ones?

### **The tale of two Internets**

Popular and academic discourse often speaks of 'The Internet,' as a technology that spans the globe offering similar platforms and affordances to all users, but this discourse also includes the idea of 'The Chinese Internet,' with a semi-porous border created by censorship, linguistic barriers, and the prevalence of strong, domestic alternatives to the Western-originated sites that are dominant across much of the rest of the world.

This situation both enhances and complicates comparative studies. The use of different platforms means that it is difficult to separate the effects of differing political, social and cultural contexts from the effects of platform and structure. However, these different platforms, which are often seen as clones with Chinese characteristics of banned services, mean that, when a structural approach is taken, these different political, social and cultural contexts can be seen reflected in the structures and affordances of the different sites.

In constructing a comparative analysis of political speech on the Chinese and Western Internet, this study focuses on speech on social networking and microblogging sites. These are not the locations that are specifically designed for political speech, nor are they the locations in which the individuals who are most involved in discussing political online gather. One important early criticism of the Internet as a potential public sphere was the small number of people who participated in online political speech (Dahlberg, 2001) and the small amount of Internet traffic that is associated with (a small number of) political sites (Hindman, 2009). However, these criticisms were developed before the emergence of social networking and microblogging sites as (one of) the dominant mode(s) of Internet communications. The protests and revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa starting in 2010, in which social media tools were heavily used by protestors, brought new hope to those who see the Internet and particularly social media platforms as potentially facilitating a redistribution of political power (particularly in non-democratic states) (Howard et al., 2011).

This study thus chooses Sina Weibo and Facebook as the two platforms to compare in assessing what the differences and similarities in online political speech between Chinese and Western social networking sites might be and whether the type of speech exhibited on Chinese social media platforms seems to justify the application of public sphere theory or traditional Chinese/Asian communication theories.

Facebook, founded in 2004, has grown over the last decade to become one of the most popular sites on the Internet. It is primarily used as a social networking site, with the majority of online connections based on offline social connections and higher degree of privacy of individually published information than other popular,

socially based Internet platforms such as Twitter or YouTube. However, the social basis of information sharing and contagion, and social influence on Facebook is very strong, as Bond et al. (2012) demonstrated in a 61-million-person-strong experiment on Facebook during the 2008 US presidential election. Social media is now one of the major sources for news information for young people (Newman, 2012) and many studies have investigated the importance of these online social networks for disseminating news information (e.g. Bakshy, Rosenn, Marlow, & Adamic, 2012; Romero, Meeder, & Kleinberg, 2011).

In terms of the diffusion of news information in a Western context, Twitter is generally seen as more important than Facebook, due to the greater openness of its information publication and network connections (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010). However, Twitter is not a platform on which users discuss the news stories that they share, with news discussion on social networking sites in a Western context generally taking place on Facebook (Bolsover, 2013)

In China both Twitter and Facebook are censored; “wall jumping” techniques are required to access these sites, meaning that they are only used by a small and specific population of mainland Chinese individuals. Instead of Twitter and Facebook, most Chinese users use domestic platforms such as the microblogging (Weibo) platforms provided by Sina and Tencent and the social networking functions provided by QQ (QQ Space). Although often referred to as a Twitter clone, Sina Weibo, the largest microblogging site in China, combines the microblogging functions of Twitter with many of the social networking functions of Facebook, providing a rich user experience that also reflects and incorporate features specific to the Chinese context (Benney, 2014).

### **Comparing political speech on Weibo and Facebook**

In order to investigate the differences between political speech on Facebook and Weibo, comments on news articles were chosen as the unit of analysis because they represent a bounded site at which discussion of political and social issues are collected. Comments on news articles also represent an ideal site for comparison of political speech because the structure and affordances both Sina Weibo and Facebook are very similar in relation to this function.

Firstly, the methods by which an individual user will see a particular news story is similar on both platforms: if they have chosen to follow that news provider, if someone they choose to follow forwards or shares that post, or if they navigate to the home page of that news provider through a search or link structure. Secondly, the information published on each site is similar. While posts on Sina Weibo are constrained to 140 characters (like on Twitter), posts on Facebook do not have a similar limit. The ability to convey a great deal more information in 140 Chinese characters than in 140 English characters is often given as a difference between how the same structural constraint operates differently in different contexts, which would complicate a comparison of news information on Sina Weibo and Twitter. However, the soft-constraint of brevity on Facebook means that the amount of information provided by news providers in their posts on Sina Weibo and Facebook is similar: on both platforms news providers will generally post several sentences that summarize the news story, an image accompanying that story and a link to the story on the news provider's website. Thirdly, both sites offer similar affordances to users to interact with news stories: users can like, comment on or forward/share the news story. Sina Weibo also offers users the option to favourite a particular post. Both sites provide a threaded commenting system at the site of the original post in which user comments are displayed next to their profile picture and a link to

their profile. Both platforms also give users the ability to like or comment on another user comment (Figure One).

### Figure One: A Visual Comparison of the Structure and Affordances of Comments on News Stories on Facebook and Weibo

A New York Times Story on Facebook



A Southern Weekend Story on Weibo



While the information, structure and affordances of both Facebook and Weibo are similar in relation to news articles, the appearance and importance afforded to different aspects is somewhat different. On Facebook, the images related to news stories are much larger and more space is given to the offsite link, with information pulled directly from the linked site. In contrast on Weibo, the attached image is much smaller and the link is shortened. This structure would likely mean that fewer Weibo users navigate away from the microblog to the website of the news provider.

On Weibo, more emphasis is put on user commentary; the box in which a user would input their comment is much larger and the submit comment button far more prominent. Weibo also allows users to filter comments to see popular comments, comments by verified users, and comments by individuals that user follows, which both puts greater emphasis on user submitted comments and allows for easier viewing of the comments that might be deemed more important. Weibo also seems to encourage user interaction with posts more than Facebook in that they list the number of users who have liked, commented or reposted a particular post or comment as part of the button that would allow a user to do the same. This structural choice would likely increase the snowball effect of already popular comments compared to Facebook where the number of users who have performed one of these functions is presented in a different location to the button that would allow the viewing user to do the same.

However, although the information, structure and affordances of both Facebook and Weibo are similar in relation to news articles, the political, social and demographic context in which these sites are used is quite different. Political speech is more likely to be censored on Weibo, with one study finding that 12% of posts from a group of 3,567 users who were likely to post on “sensitive” topics were eventually deleted (Zhu, Phipps, Pridgen, Crandall, & Wallach, 2013). The structure and affordances of Sina Weibo are also more closely linked to the political priorities of the Chinese government with, for instance, the commenting function on Sina Weibo removed for three days in March 2012 following rumours about an attempted coup by the then-powerful Politburo member Bo Xilai. However despite a greater degree of political control and uncertainty on Weibo, the expression of political opinions online is generally unproblematic (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2012)



and some posters believe they risk little apart from having their comment removed (Arsène, 2012).

Facebook, in contrast, is a US-based company that is used by individuals in many different political and social contexts. In order to construct an appropriate comparison, this study focuses on political speech on Facebook in a US context. Chinese-style censorship by deletion on Facebook is very uncommon in the US. According to the latest Facebook transparency report, the company received no US government requests to restrict user comments during the second half of 2013 (in comparison India made almost 5000 requests) (Facebook, 2014). However, the US leads the world in terms of requests for users data on Facebook; making more than 12,000 requests in the second half of 2013 (3.5 times more than the next nearest country India) (Facebook, 2014). With increasing awareness of the extent of US government surveillance of online communications and the extent to which information published online can be seen by unintended others, Western Facebook users now engage more frequently in self-censorship (Das & Kramer, 2013; Sleeper et al., 2013) and act to control the information that is published about them online (Blank, Bolsover, & Dubois, 2014).

While the information, appearance, structure and affordances of both Weibo and Facebook are similar with regards to accessing and interacting with news information, it is important, however, to keep in mind the differences in offline political and social contexts in interpreting the reasons for any differences found between modes and styles of online political speech on these two platforms.

## **Methodology**

This overview of theories of political speech both in China and the West, and an examination of how these theories have been applied to the Chinese Internet

raises several issues: To what extent is it appropriate to apply the theory of the public sphere (generated in a specific historical and cultural context) to the Chinese Internet, given its different social, political, cultural and economic contexts of use? To what extent do online communications reflect traditional conceptions of the differences between Eastern and Western styles of communication? Does the way in which people comment on political issues online differ between Eastern and Western Internet users, what might be the reasons for these differences and what might these differences mean for the way that theories of online political communication are applied on the Chinese Internet?

In order to address these questions, comments on news articles on the social media sites Sina Weibo and Facebook were chosen as the unit of analysis. The New York Times and Southern Weekend were chosen as news providers with comparable standing on each platform, each being seen as leading investigative and liberal papers in their respective national contexts. News stories were selected based on a quadrant sampling strategy, to include political, social and international issues. Within each of these quadrants stories were selected so as to be roughly comparable in each of their respective contexts. However, to ensure that a similar number of comments were analysed on each platform four New York Times stories were analysed compared to three stories from Southern Weekend, with two stories on the same international issue combined in the New York Times data (Table 1). In total, 835 comments were examined across both platforms.

Content analysis was chosen as the appropriate methodology to address this question because it can provide an “objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication,” (Berelson, 1952, p. 52). A coding scheme was created that included measures of the traditional paradigmatic

assumptions of Eastern and Western communication differences, based on the dichotomies summarized by G. Chen and An (2009). Typical indicators of deliberative discourse were also included in the coding scheme, based on the operationalization put forward by Dahlberg (2001).

**Table 1: News Stories Chosen for Analysis**

	The New York Times on Facebook	Southern Weekend on Weibo
Political issue	Announcement of a proposed change by President Obama to the controversial Affordable Care Act - 167 comments	Report of anti-corruption investigations and arrests among Party officials - 180 comments
Social issues	Critique of America's prison policy that results in offenders being jailed for non violent crimes - 95 comments	Official criticism of the practice of buying brides from Vietnam - 66 comments
International issue	Report of the destruction caused in the Philippines by Typhoon Haiyan - 80 comments Report of the impediments to aid distribution in the Philippines following Typhoon Haiyan - 62 comments	Report of the devastation caused by Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines and the aid offered by China - 185 comments
	Total number of comments analysed - 404	Total number of comments analysed - 431

However, out of Dahlberg's six-part schema both autonomy from state and economic power (i.e. that speech should be driven by the concerns of publicly-oriented citizens rather than by money or administrative power) and reflexivity (i.e. that participants should critically examine their cultural values, assumptions and interests) were dropped from the final coding scheme because in the first case it was too difficult to assess what considerations lay behind user posts simply from the examination of such a short text and in the second case no comments were found in preliminary tests that demonstrated the requisite level of reflexivity. Therefore, four of Dahlberg's six requirements are assessed in this study: exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims, ideal role taking, sincerity, and discursive inclusion and equality. The final coding scheme is shown in Table 2.

While content analysis generally has coders overlap on only a percentage of the materials to be coded, in this study all of the posts were coded by two bilingual coders: one British (the author) and one Chinese. While this choice meant that the sampling frame was necessarily smaller, it was important to have both a Western and a Chinese coder code each comment so that the codes assigned to comments could be said to be true for individuals from both an Eastern and Western cultural context. The coding scheme was refined over the course of three pilot tests that used data from both platforms. After each test, the coders met to discuss changes to the coding scheme.

In coding the final dataset, in cases where the coders disagreed both coders were given a second opportunity to independently code that comment. If disagreement was still present, that data was not included in the final analysis. (This is the difference between the total coded and N columns of Table 2). Final percentage agreements for each question were over 90%, except for two questions

**Table 2: Results, significance and agreements**

Does the comment...	Weibo	Facebook	Total Coded	N	Significance of difference (two-tailed ttest)	Percentage agreement	Kappa
Talk at the original poster (as opposed to talking to others)	81 %	53 %	742	712	p < 0.0001***	95.83 %	0.9082
Express a point of view	99 %	97 %	742	740	p = 0.0180*	99.73 %	0.9431
Express their point of view subtly (as opposed to directly)	21 %	20 %	723	679	p = 0.7395	93.92 %	0.8294
Use instructional language	13 %	16 %	723	694	p = 0.3241	96.13 %	0.8553
Provide reasons to support their point of view	43 %	51 %	723	696	p = 0.0484*	96.27 %	0.9252
Are these reasons...							
Subtle (as opposed to direct)	30 %	26 %	325	301	p = 0.5073	92.68 %	0.8253
Subjective (as opposed to objective)	67 %	58 %	325	296	p = 0.1063	91.16 %	0.8140
Based on universal truths (as opposed to dependent on the situation)	12 %	12 %	325	310	p = 0.8883	95.43 %	0.8087
Evaluated based on ritual and tradition (as opposed to reason)	41 %	16 %	325	301	p < 0.0001***	93.38 %	0.8120
Use the plural form (as opposed to singular or neither)	7 %	12 %	739	705	N/A	95.42 %	0.9034
Attempt to prevent others from speaking	10 %	7 %	739	723	p = 0.1373	97.85 %	0.9417
Make an individual argument as part of a debate	30 %	41 %	739	718	p = 0.0011**	97.31 %	0.9417
See distinct, opposing groups of opinion holders	25 %	18 %	260	222	p = 0.2277	85.71 %	0.6190
Show evidence of attempting to understand situation from others' perspectives	30 %	49 %	260	226	p = 0.0058**	87.26 %	0.7408
Attempt to work toward a consensus or resolution	11 %	32 %	260	236	p = 0.0003***	91.12 %	0.7723
Accept that others have the right to their own opinions	14 %	16 %	260	242	p = 0.6769	93.44 %	0.7704

Notes: \* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001

that had agreements of 87 and 85% (Table 2). The Kappa scores for each question were above 0.7, except for one question that had a kappa score of 0.62. These scores are well within acceptable levels of intercoder agreement for this type of research (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002; Neuendorf, 2002).

### **Little support for the applicability of public sphere theory on Chinese microblogs**

An analysis of comments on news stories on Facebook and Weibo produced little support for the idea that the concept of a Habermasian public sphere could be meaningfully applied in this context. Although many studies based on Western populations have noted a lack of rational, interpersonal discussion online, comments on Facebook were much closer to these ideals than those on Weibo. For instance, comments on Facebook were more than twice as likely as those on Weibo to be addressed toward other participants as opposed to talking back to the original poster: 47% of comments on Facebook were addressed towards other participants compared to 19% on Weibo. This difference was highly significant ( $p < 0.0001$ )<sup>2</sup>.

However given that this research is based on a sample of a small number of stories on each platform, any differences noted between the two platforms should be examined to ensure that they are likely true cross-platform differences rather than a result of the individual stories sampled. Examining individual story percentages, it seems that the much greater tendency of Facebook commentators to talk with others is really a platform difference. In the four stories analysed on Facebook, the percentage of comments identified as talking to others were 56, 47, 32 and 44; compared to 14, 18 and 34 on Weibo. The higher frequency of talking to others in the third Weibo story (concerning the practice of buying brides from

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<sup>2</sup> All p-values quoted here are based on a two-tailed ttest, the results of which are presented, along with other relevant statistics, in Table 2.

Vietnam) was due to a high number of posters who used the article to make fun of their friends' love prospects, rather than engaging in conversation with prior posters. Examining the percentage of comments on each individual story that were directed at others, we can conclude that comments on Facebook are more than twice as likely to be talking with others, as opposed to simply talking back to the original poster, and that this difference is likely a difference between the two platforms rather than a result of the stories chosen.

Another indication of greater adherence to a rational, discursive communicatory ideal on Facebook was the number of commentators that gave reasons to support their point of view: 51% on Facebook compared to 43% on Weibo ( $p = 0.0484$ ). However, the percentage of comments that gave reasons to support their point of view varied greatly by story and more investigation would be necessary to confirm that this is a platform rather than sampling frame difference.

Despite the tentative nature of these results concerning the prevalence of reason giving, it matches with previous research that concluded that Chinese netizens use the Internet simply as an outlet to express their opinions rather than to engage in debates with others. In their examination of Chinese blogs, Wang and Hong concluded that this technology was overwhelmingly used to document personal feeling and opinions and had relatively little value as a medium for organized free speech, writing that "the key to the deliberative process is to allow people to form opinions rather than simply express them... (and that) Chinese bloggers have relatively little experience in online public debate, contests, and opinion forming" (2010, p. 76). Other empirical research into comments on Weibo similarly concluded that the flow and performativity of comments was much more important than their actual content (Poell et al., 2014).

On a variety of measures, comments on Weibo were more divisive and less constructive than those of Facebook, indicating a style of communication much closer to a liberal, individualistic rather than a rationally, discursive model. Comments on Facebook were much more likely to make an individual argument as part of a wider debate, show evidence of attempting to see the situation from others' perspectives, and attempt to work towards consensus or resolution in a debate.

Comments on Weibo were also slightly more likely to attempt to prevent others from speaking or being heard (for instance, by attacking the intelligence of a previous poster) than those on Facebook: 10% on Weibo compared to 7% on Facebook. However, this difference was not statistically significant ( $p = 0.1373$ ) and it is not clear if this difference is between platforms or simply between stories. While conclusions should not be drawn from this result on its own, the conclusion that comments on Weibo are more divisive and less constructive is supported by strong and significant results in other areas.

Firstly, comments on Facebook were more likely to make an individual argument as part of a wider debate, linking their argument to a wider social or political issue: 41% on Facebook compared to 30% on Weibo ( $p = 0.0011$ ). The percentages for each story seem to suggest that this is different in platforms rather than sampling frame, with 31, 32 and 19% of comments on the Weibo stories making an individual argument as part of a debate compared to 46, 50, 23 and 44% on Facebook. This finding lends more support to the conclusion that comments on Facebook are more likely to align with a rational, discursive ideal than those on Weibo.



In regards to whether the commentator showed evidence of trying to understand the situation from others' perspectives, there was a large and significant difference between platforms: 32% on Facebook as opposed to 11% on Weibo ( $p = 0.0058$ ). However in examining the percentages of posters in each individual story who showed evidence of trying to understand the situation from others' perspectives, it is not clear whether this difference is simply due to the sampling frame. In the Weibo stories 40, 14 and 67% of comments that made an individual argument as part of a debate showed evidence of trying to understand the situation from others perspectives compared to 43, 46, 33 and 69% on Facebook. It seems that it may have been that nationalistic tensions were heightened in the comments on the story about China's aid to the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan, resulting in only 14% of relevant comments showing evidence of attempting to understand the situation from the other's perspective and causing the difference between platforms seen in the overall results that might not have been present if different stories were chosen for analysis.

However, the number of commentators making an individual argument as part of a debate who tried to work toward consensus or resolution shows a large and highly-significant cross-platform difference. Only 15, 8, and 11% of applicable comments on Weibo tried to work toward consensus or resolution, compared to 24, 25, 44 and 44 on Facebook. This difference, which is highly significant ( $p = 0.0003$ ), lends support to previous conclusions that discussions on Weibo are more divisive and less constructive than those on Facebook.

These results, when examined together, provide strong support for the conclusion that comments on Facebook align much more with public sphere ideals than those on Weibo. The concept of a public sphere has long dominated normative

assessments of the Internet in China; however, commentators on Weibo are much less likely to be using the platform to engage in public sphere style communications than those on Facebook. This result calls into question the applicability of public sphere theory in studying political speech on the Chinese Internet and suggests that political, social, economic and cultural context needs to be taken into account when applying Western-generated theories in China.

### **Differences do not align with traditional dichotomies**

Those who try to generate new normative frameworks for assessing political speech on the Chinese Internet or explain the reasons for differences between Chinese and Western populations often turn to traditional Chinese philosophies and traditional conceptions of cultural differences. Chinese individuals are thought of as expressing their ideas more subtly, being more tolerant of dissenting opinions, being more interested in promoting in-group harmony, and using more ritualistic, non-linear reasoning (G. Chen & An, 2009; Rosenberg, 2006). The section above has already illustrated that comments on Weibo were actually more divisive and less accommodating than comments on Facebook, in contrast to both public sphere ideals and the idea of harmonious communitarianism.

Commentators on Weibo were no more likely to express their point of view subtly than those on Facebook: 21% of comments on Weibo expressed their point of view subtly compared to 20% on Facebook. There was also no difference in whether reasons given to support a point of view were stated subtly or directly. Although 30% of reasons given to support a point of view on Weibo were subtle compared to 26% on Facebook, this difference was not large enough to be statistically significant given the size of our sample.

The adage that Chinese people express themselves more subtly than Westerners is extremely common; however, it appears that it does not hold when comparing comments on news stories on Weibo (in a mainland Chinese context) and Facebook (in a US context). There are many potential reasons for this difference: it could be that after a decade of “opening up,” Chinese individuals have lost their traditional subtleness; it could be a property of the demographics of microblog users; or it could also be that traditional subtleness was linked to social hierarchies that break down on microblogs, where commentators are less likely to know the offline identities of those they communicate with or ever meet these individuals in person.

Based on traditional dichotomies, it would be hypothesized that Facebook users situated in a US context would be more likely to use instructional language, being described as “sermonic” by G. Chen and An's 2009 dichotomy, compared to Easterners' more “agreeable” style of communication. However, no statistically significant difference was found between the percentage of commentators who used instructional language (13% on Weibo and 16% on Facebook). The potential reasons for this may be similar to that of the lack of expected subtlety on Weibo. A third result in contradiction of traditional dichotomies was that Chinese commentators were no more likely than those on Facebook to give reasons that were based on universal truths: 12% on both platforms.

There were, however, three places in which comments differed between Weibo and Facebook in line with traditional conceptions of communicatory differences. The first was that reasons given by Weibo commentators were more than twice as likely to be evaluated based on ritual and tradition than comments on Facebook: 41% on Weibo compared to 16% on Facebook. This difference was

highly significant ( $p < 0.0001$ ) and there were clear differences between platforms with 43, 41 and 42% of reasons evaluated based on ritual and tradition in each of the Weibo stories, compared to 20, 6, 8 and 17% in the Facebook stories. This difference is primarily due to the prevalence of the use of parables and idioms in Chinese.

Also in line with traditional dichotomies, Chinese users were more likely to base their reasons on subjective experience (such as a personal experience of the individual): 67% on Weibo compared to 58% on Facebook. However, this difference is not large enough to be statistically significant given the size of the sample and it is not clear whether this difference is due to variations between Facebook and Weibo or simply between stories. In the Weibo stories, 59, 67 and 72% of reasons were based on subjective evidence. On Facebook, both the stories on healthcare policy and prison policy had similar levels of subjectively supported points of view (both 63%); however both stories concerning Typhoon Haiyan on Facebook had lower levels of subjectively supported reasons, 53 and 31%. In contrast, the story about the typhoon on Weibo, whose content was essentially the same as those on Facebook had the highest proportion of subjectively based reasons (72%) of all three stories examined. This suggests that whether reasons given by commentators to support their point of view are based on subjective or objective evidence may be dependent more on the commentator's individual orientation toward the issue rather than having a contextual basis. It is important to remember that differences in the type of evidence given may also not be due to traditional cultural differences but rather related to a lack of access to, ambiguity in or distrust of the objective facts that could be used to support an individual's point of view.

Thirdly, large differences were found between the pronouns (or lack thereof) used on Facebook and Weibo that broadly, although not perfectly, align with traditional dichotomies. Based on traditional conceptions, it would be hypothesized that commentators on Weibo would use far more plural pronouns compared to a greater frequency of singular pronoun use on Facebook. However, the real difference was between singular pronouns and undirected statements. True to predictions comments on Facebook were almost five times as likely as those on Weibo to use (or imply) a singular pronoun: 34% on Facebook compared to 7% on Weibo. While statistically significant, the difference between the proportion of comments that used (or implied) a plural subject was not very large (12% on Facebook and 7% on Weibo), a result that stands in contrast to the we/I dichotomy presented in G. Chen and An (2009). The largest difference, however, was in the number of comments that neither used nor implied either a plural or singular pronoun: 87% on Weibo compared to 54% on Facebook, indicating a significantly different style of speech and address.

In conclusion, the differences in comments on Weibo and Facebook often align with traditional dichotomies in the way that points of view or reasons are expressed: pronoun use, subjective evidence and the use of ritualistic reasons. However in terms of interpersonal communication and group dynamics, Weibo users are no more subtle or harmonious than those on Facebook and are no less likely to use instructional language. This finding calls into question the applicability of traditional theories to analyse or explain political speech on the Chinese Internet.

### **Implications for theory and practice**

Two main conclusions can be drawn from the above results. Firstly, comments on Weibo do not align with traditional conceptions of Eastern styles of

communication. They are no subtler than comments posted on Facebook. They are certainly no more harmonious; if anything, they are more divisive. This means that, while those attempting to generate theories to apply to political communication on the Chinese Internet should understand traditional philosophies, any theory that is based solely on traditional ideas will be likely to be inadequate. Further research efforts should investigate whether the high levels of divisiveness found in comments on news stories on Weibo are present in other Chinese online spaces and, if differences are found, evaluate the structural and demographic particularities of these spaces. Another avenue for further inquiry would be to investigate whether the style of communication found on Weibo is present in offline contexts or whether it is a property of the online space (for instance, due to the lack of offline social hierarchies).

These findings also call into question whether the concept of the public sphere and the ideal of rational discursive dialogue are the most appropriate normative frameworks for evaluating political speech in China. Commentators on news stories on Weibo appear to adhere much less to these ideals than those on Facebook and use the platform much less frequently to engage in reasoned interpersonal debate with other users and with the aim of reaching a consensus or resolution.

These findings align with much work, both quantitative (e.g. Asur, Yu, & Huberman, 2011) and qualitative, work that concludes that “the Chinese online public space is characteristic of highly organized centralization and a vibrant proliferation of popular discourses and folk narratives, as well as a narrowing space for rational deliberation” (Li, 2010). However, as the Li quote demonstrates, rational deliberation is still held up as the standard for online discourse and this

focus on the public sphere as a normative ideal may act to obscure an understanding of the actual conditions of online political speech in China.

This research has shown that there are large and statistically significant differences in the way in which users comment on news articles on the structurally similar platforms of Facebook and Weibo. The empirical differences in the way that commentators express their opinions and interact with each other suggest that both Western-generated public sphere theory and traditional ideas about Chinese/Asian styles of communication may not be the most appropriate theoretical lenses to use to evaluate political speech on microblogs. These differences show that the context of use of the platform needs to be taken into account when generating, modifying, and applying theories and evaluating political speech on the Chinese Internet. The continued use of public sphere theory as the primary means for evaluating online political speech in China will likely result in important aspects of this speech (such as performativity, community building, and self-expression) being overlooked because the normative standards and goals being applied are not shared by the commentators and these results suggest that future research is necessary to develop normative theories of political participation that are applicable in modern China.

### **Limitations and further directions**

This research effort is not without limitations. Further empirical work could clearly use larger sampling frames, examine different platforms, and construct comparisons that can more clearly distinguish between the effects of case and the effects of culture. In order to avoid coder assumption bias, a team with more resources could translate materials so that coders would not know from which culture or platform they originated.

It should also be noted that in this case platforms stand in for cultures and nations. We cannot guarantee that all commentators on Weibo are Chinese nor that all those on Facebook are Western (although this problem is more acute on Facebook). Further research efforts could construct a sampling frame of comments only from coders with a geocoded location in a specific country.

It would be possible to approach a similar research question using automated content analysis, which would enable the use of much larger sampling frames. This would be made more difficult by the amount of slang, dialects and sayings used, particularly in the Chinese texts; the vast variability of texts, including many very short texts; and the interdependence of the comments. However, automated approaches would be an interesting venue for further research in this area.

A parallel research strand should interview netizens about how they see their online political speech before constructing theories, rather than simply analysing texts, and should clearly consider the offline effects, both symbolic and instrumental, of online speech and the legal, political and social regulatory context in which the speaker is embedded.

While every effort has been made to be transparent and reflexive about this research project, we must remain aware that if it is true that there are major differences in communication styles between Eastern and Western individuals this may preclude the effective addressing of the question of their existence. Although this study used two coders who are both bilingual in Mandarin and English both having spent significant time in mainland China and the UK, there were still points upon which we had difficulty agreeing on how concepts should be operationalized in the coding frame, requiring a decision to be made that favoured one coder's



interpretation over the other. This was particularly true for operationalizing what constituted both subtle and instructional language. A deeper analysis of these areas of disagreement using alternative methodologies could provide more insight into potential culturally based communicatory differences.

However despite these limitations, this study represents a significant step in questioning the applicability of the theories of political speech often used to study online political communication in China. Given the lack of empirical evidence about the general nature of online political speech in China, the effort to generate new theories is still premature. However, given the lack of applicable theories many current research efforts are stuck in the descriptive and exploratory phases. This article has shown that the oft-used concept of the public sphere and the implicit standard of rational discourse may be inappropriate in the Chinese context. However, equally, traditional theories of a Chinese-style of communication have little relevance to the online speech of today's netizens, which does not reflect traditional ideas of harmonious, community-orientated communications. Further research should work from these and other empirically based analyses of political speech on the Chinese Internet to build more appropriate theoretical frameworks based on an understanding of how political ideas are actually produced, transmitted and received, rather than continuing to apply foreign or ancient theoretical lenses without a critical interrogation of their applicability to their context of application.

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