eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/

Informing the Government or Fostering Public Debate? How Chinese Discussion Forums Open Up Spaces for Deliberation

Yu Sun, Todd Graham, and Marcel Broersma

Abstract

This article focuses on a popular form of civic practice in China: casual political talk that occurs in online spaces that are not ostensibly political. We investigate how Chinese citizens engage in politics through a comparative analysis of everyday talk on health issues across three popular online discussion forums: a government-orientated forum (*Qiangguo Luntan*), a commercial-lifestyle forum (*Tieba*), and a commercial-topical forum focused on parental advice (*Yaolan*). Our findings show that conventional deliberation directly involving conflictual and resistant attitude against state authorities is not prominently embraced by Chinese citizens in everyday online settings. However, communal and less confrontational forms of discourse are important for the proto-political talk to turn political, thus serving as prerequisite conditions for the emergence of an online public sphere. We argue that to explain how the public sphere emerges in everyday (non-political) spaces in China, it is essential to take communal discursive forms into account.

Keywords

Political talk; online deliberation; public sphere; China; online forums; public healthcare politics

Introduction

The internet has evolved rapidly in China in the last 25 years. It is now used by more than half of the population (CNNIC 2017), penetrating many aspects of Chinese people's lives. Scholars have long debated the extent to which this has brought about political change in China. Some scholars claim the internet has facilitated the growth of civil society and the expansion of the public sphere, despite the government's measures to control it (Yang 2003; Zheng and Wu 2005; Yang 2009; Jiang 2010). Critics argue that the government adopted the Chinese internet as a tool of authoritarian control and propaganda to win legitimacy and sustain the regime (Kalathil and Boas 2003; Mackinnon 2011). Our work builds upon recent studies that reflect upon the limitations of such narratives and emphasize the multiple modes of communication and diverse

actors within Chinese cyberspace (Han 2015a). We focus on a popular form of civic practice which has been understudied in current Chinese internet scholarship: casual political talk that occurs in online spaces that are not ostensibly political but offer a social realm for citizens to detect issues of public concern from citizens' lifeworld and engage in relevant public discourse.

Unlike Western democracies, where citizens can participate in civic organizations, voting, and formal forums for political engagement, it is difficult for Chinese citizens to articulate their concerns about public (health) issues through civic organizations or other formal means of political participation. However, if the state considers it in the public interest, it provokes and channels debate in a controlled manner. In 2009, the government invited citizens to participate in the process of healthcare reform through online portals specifically established for this reason. However, these online consultation channels were mainly accessed by society's privileged groups (Balla 2014).

Due to the lack of physical spaces and limited online spaces for participation, Chinese citizens generally participate in politics through informal networks. In these unofficial spaces, citizens can circumvent censorship in their conversations (Liu 2017). Given this lack of formal space to participate in healthcare policymaking, internet-based communications may provide a way for ordinary citizens to discuss and negotiate these issues with the established order. In this article, we analyze how average, politically disorganized Chinese citizens use these forums to politically engage with health issues in their everyday life, and how they negotiate with healthcare policies at the micro-level in their everyday talk about public health. We ask whether deliberation or other forms of communication that foster public discourse emerge from such talk, serving to

strengthen the public's position in (healthcare) governance. Specifically, we examine

how citizens talk about healthcare issues online, and how this intertwines with aspects

and practices of everyday life: interpersonal relations, social interactions, and cultural

context (Habermas 1987, 138).

The Position of the Public in Healthcare Governance

With the complaint "Too difficult to see a doctor, too expensive to see a doctor!"

spreading in China, healthcare reform has been pushed up on the national political

agenda. Bridging the private and public spheres, health issues open up space for citizens

to participate in the politics of public health policy (Liu 2009). In China, the

relationships between healthcare providers, citizens (patients), and different levels of

government are important determinants of the governance structure (Ramesh et al.

2012). Patients are the most vulnerable actors in relation to both local governments and

healthcare service providers, due to the limited channels for mobilizing and organizing

collective action (Ramesh et al. 2012). The government's capacity to supervise and

control has been weakened since it reduced subsidies for healthcare providers and

public hospitals were given autonomy to pursue their interests during the transition to a

market economy. Consequently, citizens' participation is extremely important for the

central government to hold local governments accountable and to supervise regional

providers, thus winning legitimacy for the CCP's (Communist Party of China) rule.

Public participation plays a crucial role in the complex structure of healthcare

governance.

In 2008, the public was first invited to participate in reforming healthcare,

signaling a "healthcare democracy" (Liu 2009). Chinese citizens were able to articulate

their preferences and practice democratic values (Balla 2014), and give feedback on

3

healthcare policy (Kornreich et al. 2012). Nevertheless, the online portals only offered citizens the chance to respond to the government's policy; citizen deliberation on healthcare issues was not promoted (Kornreich et al. 2012). Moreover, this was a communication process between the government and selected citizens, who tended to be well-educated, urban, and middle class (Balla 2014).

Given such a narrow space for ordinary people to participate in healthcare policymaking, whether and how the internet can strengthen the public's position in healthcare governance remains worthy of scholarly attention. This study moves beyond government-initiated and -organized online platforms, and instead focuses on informal online spaces where ordinary citizens conduct casual conversations about their everyday life experiences and where political talk emerges. We investigate the civic and participatory opportunities that such spaces open up regarding health care issues.

The Chinese Internet and the Public Sphere

With the rapid expansion of ICTs, there has been growing scholarly debate about the internet's implications for Chinese politics and society. Some view the internet as a tool for political change, arguing it has not only provided users with access to the pluralist framing of issues (Lewis 2013), but it has also strengthened civic networks (Yang 2003; Yang 2007). Moreover, it has nurtured a contentious and participatory cyber-culture (Yang 2009), opened up spaces for public deliberation (Jiang 2010), and promoted the public sphere (Zheng and Wu 2005).

Others believe that the Chinese internet is merely a tool for authoritarian control. Confronting the challenges of the digital world, the Chinese government has developed strategies such as applying computer filtering to censor sensitive topics, encouraging self-censorship, and cracking down on dissidents (Kalathil and Boas 2003). Any online

information or activity that potentially threatens the stability of the state is forbidden.

Mackinnon (2011, 33) calls this "networked authoritarianism". According to King et al.

(2013), the government tolerates general social criticism online but oppresses activities

aimed at mobilizing collective action.

In response to the changing internet ecology, the government has updated its

online strategies to tighten its control. New tactics have been applied, including hiring

online commentators – the "water army" or "fifty-cent army" – to shape online opinion

(King et al. 2013). The government has also been taking more proactive measures to

maintain social stability such as pushing local officials online to interact with netizens

via e-government programs. Schlæger and Jiang (2014, 18) show that official

microblogging mostly reinforces existing power arrangements, producing "politics as

usual".

Existing literature on state-society relations in the digital age has demonstrated

the resistant effect of the internet but has also revealed internet adoption strategies

aimed at enhancing the state's resilience. To do justice to the dynamics of political

communication in China, scholars have called for a new framework for rethinking the

complex and plural nature of the Chinese internet. As Han's (2015a) study shows,

various social actors can influence the formation of public opinion. For instance, the

"voluntary fifty-cent army", who are neither enthusiastic about political contention, nor

supportive of state propaganda, are influential in the process of public deliberation.

Online Spaces and Everyday Political Talk in China
Coleman (2007, 57) asserts that beyond the formal political sphere there are "potential

spaces of democracy" in everyday life where ordinary individuals can actively negotiate

with power in more personal ways. Such spaces not only bring social opportunities for

users but also shape citizens' public life. Papacharissi (2010) suggests that internet-enabled everyday practices constitute a new social realm for citizens' civic engagement.

Unlike liberal democracies where public participation tends to be institutionalized by civic organizations, political participation in China is unorganized and un-institutionalized. Given the lack of physical spaces of participation, everyday digital practices may provide civic engagement opportunities. Such practices are allowed, and sometimes actively fostered, by the government. For example, Teets (2014, 2) argues that "consultant authoritarianism" has been promoted in China to encourage the growth of civil society under the state's authoritarian rule. Moving beyond the simple dichotomy of resistance and control, this model emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between the state and society. It argues that the state encourages plural forms of political participation from the bottom up while at the same time creating more indirect and nuanced forms of control. The Chinese word *guan* (to manage), which means to control, supervise, and discipline (like parents taking care of children), represents the state's attitudes towards civil society, thus embodying the patriarchal underpinnings of China's consultant authoritarianism.

Scholars have observed new and innovative ways of being political thru mundane online practices by Chinese netizens. For example, Weibo activists use depoliticized discourse to articulate their claims and contest the hegemony of official discourses (Gleiss 2015). However, as of yet a popular form of civic practice has been understudied in Chinese internet studies: casual political talk that occurs in online spaces that are not ostensibly political.

Political talk opens up opportunities for political engagement. It is more accessible to lay citizens, including marginalized groups, than deliberation in formal

settings (Zhang 2010). Moreover, ordinary political conversations bridge the personal and political spheres, creating a more integrated lifeworld (Wyatt et al. 2000) where citizens can develop their subjectivities and understand others (Kim and Kim 2008). Everyday political talk also helps citizens "work out their preferences, try out justifications for them, and develop confidence about performing in the public arena" (Conover and Searing 2005, 281). Most importantly, blurring the boundaries of the political and non-political, everyday political talk carries the potential to open up a public realm where Chinese citizens can circumvent censorship. Thus, studying everyday political talk offers us chances to reveal how the dynamics of empowerment and control are negotiated at the micro-level under the state's consultant authoritarianism (Teets 2014). By so doing, we are enabled to further explore the complex nature of the online public sphere emerging from non-political space.

Research Focus and Method

The Chinese internet is fragmented and localized and permeated by urban and consumerist lifestyles (Damm 2007). This does not encourage citizens to pursue radical democratic change, but rather promotes personal and identity politics. This article extends these insights in state-society dynamics by exploring mundane communicative practices in everyday spaces. These do not necessarily have a political goal or involve the state, yet they contribute to developing citizens' subjectivity and civic agency. Our approach focuses on mundane online political conversations about public health issues that reveal the social-civic culture where those communicative practices take place.

We adopted an inclusive approach to analyze the nature of political talk, involving both its deliberative qualities and its informal, everyday characteristics. First, we used normative criteria of deliberation, building on Habermas's theory of

communicative action and the public sphere (1984, 1987, 1989, 1996), to explore whether/how Western ideals are applied in the Chinese context. The public sphere refers to a social space where citizens engage in the exchange of claims about matters of common concern, aiming at a shared understanding of the discussed issue (Habermas, 1984). Communicative action, the process of deliberation, is central in the formation of a communicative space for citizens to discover what concerns the common good and what political will they have. Similarly, in China, we think informal deliberation (political talk) – the exchange of opinions and concerns – enables citizens to identify political issues from their lifeworld, which is an important condition of a public sphere.

Discursive exchanges do not always occur in the form of strict deliberation; they might be embedded within other forms of communication originating from the informal characteristics of everyday political talk in China. Therefore, we also examined social-civic communicative forms unique to the social-cultural norms of Chinese society. Taking into account the social-cultural dimensions that anchor practices of everyday political talk, we construct a more grounded model of deliberation and the (online) public sphere in China. We ask the following research questions:

RQ1. To what extent does political talk in Chinese online spaces meet the conditions of deliberation as outlined in Habermas's public sphere theory?

RQ2. What social-civic communicative forms, beyond the framework of deliberation, emerge during political talk?

We examine three Chinese-speaking discussion forums with distinct characters: a government-run political forum, a commercial-lifestyle forum that mixes politics with lifestyle issues, and a commercial-topical forum dedicated to parental advice. The latter two forums are not obviously political but are primarily concerned with private matters such as lifestyle issues and parenting. Sometimes, during everyday talk, these spaces become political as participants make connections between their lives and the social issues of the day. We expect that everyday talk triggers deliberative discussions more frequently on the governmental forum than the commercial forums, while social-civic forms of communication, which are not considered central to the conventional notion of deliberation, are more prominent on the commercial ones. The differences and similarities that emerge from our comparative analysis allow us to better understand and explain the communicative practices emerging in everyday online spaces in China. Based on the comparative analysis, we ask:

RQ3. How do the forum's character/characteristics impact the nature of everyday political talk?

Three cases

Qiangguo Luntan (Strengthening the Nation Forum) is a political forum hosted by the People's Daily. It was established in 1999 as a space for nationalistic protest against NATO's bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia. It subsequently became a platform for discussion of policy issues concerning China's development.

Baidu Tieba (hereafter, *Tieba*) was started in 2003 by the Chinese search engine company, Baidu. This commercial forum, which is accessible to all, became popular

among grass-roots users because of its entertainment orientation. It provides a social hub for citizens to discuss fun stuff (e.g., games and comics) and other lifestyle matters.

Yaolan is a non-political forum established in 1999 to help parents deal with the problems of child-rearing. The website covers topics related to pregnancy, health and nutrition, childcare, and education.

Sampling

Identifying political talk about public health issues in non-political spaces is like looking for a needle in a haystack. Similar to Wright's (2018) sampling method for identifying political talk in non-political spaces, or what he calls online 'third spaces', we first used keywords to identify potential threads where political talk about public health issues may have emerged (see Table 1). The keywords reflect citizens' public health concerns, covering broad topical areas discussed in public at the time of data collection, allowing us to grasp as much related data as possible.[1] Threads were then checked for the presence of 'political' talk.

Wright et al. (2015, 74) describe political talk as something that "emerges in the process of everyday talk, often interweaved with conversations that do not have a political character, includes mundane reflections upon power, its uses and ramifications, and possesses qualities that enable it to contribute to meaningful public action". How then do we identify 'political' talk? Using Graham's (2008, 22–23) criteria for identifying political talk in non-political forums, which used a broad approach inspired by Mansbridge (1999), threads that contained a post where a participant linked an experience or a particular interest/concern to more general public health issues in China – what Kligler-Vilenchik (2015) calls "scaling up" – which aroused reflection and

response by other participants, were selected for analysis.

Based on the above criteria, we randomly collect 25 threads per forum created between 2013 and 2015.[2] The *Qiangguo Luntan* sample consisted of 610 posts (January–September 2015). Discussions on this forum often relate to explicitly political topics such as public health policies, relevant policy proposals, and news. *Tieba's* sample consisted of 1096 posts (January 2013–October 2015). Talk on *Tieba* tended to mix conventional public health politics with people's personal public health experiences. The sample of political talk from *Yaolan* consisted of 472 posts (January 2013–September 2015), mostly originating from participants' private concerns about public health issues.

Table1. Public Health Keywords

Keywords	English translation
吸烟/禁烟/控烟	Smoking/anti-smoking/ban on smoking
疫苗/防疫/卫生防疫	Vaccines/epidemic prevention
公共卫生	Public health and people's livelihood
医院/医生	Hospitals/doctors
看病	Medical care
医保	Health insurance
医患矛盾	Doctor-patient relations
医闹	Violence against medical practitioners
药品/医药店	Medicines/Drugstore
医疗改革	Healthcare reform

Content analysis

Content analysis, which employed latent coding categories, was the primary method for

examining the nature of online political talk. The unit of analysis was an individual

post, and the context unit of analysis was the discussion thread where a post was

situated. To provide more depth to the analysis, the quantitative findings are

supplemented by qualitative examples and insight to demonstrate tendencies in online

communicative practices. For an overview of the coding categories/measures, see Table

2.

Table 2. Coding Scheme Overview

Coding category	Measurement
Rationality	We measured rationality based on the presence or absence of the following: posts that were on topic and contained an explicit assertion supported by an expressed justification, which provided external evidence such as facts, sources, examples, or personal experiences –*reasoned claim*.
Continuity	We measured *continuity* based on the presence or absence of strong-strings. A strong-string is a minimum of three posts involved in a reciprocal exchange of reasoned claims.
Convergence	We measured *convergence* based on the presence or absence of the following: posts that (partially) conceded (or agreed-to-disagree with) to the 'better' argument during the exchange.
Reciprocity	We measured *reciprocity* based on whether a post was a reply to another post. Posts were coded as replies if they responded to another post directly (via the platform's reply function) or indirectly (latently responding to another post without using the reply function).
Sincerity	We measured sincerity based on the presence or absence of the following: posts that challenged or expressed doubt

	concerning the truthfulness/sincerity of another participant's posts – *questionable sincerity*.
Discursive equality	We measured discursive equality based on the presence or absence of *degrading* comments: posts that degrade another participant's claim, opinion, or person – *degrading*.
Complaining	We measured *complaining* based on the presence or absence of the following: posts that expressed unhappiness or discontent with an issue, policy, or state of affairs.
Questioning	We measured *questioning* based on the presence or absence of the following: posts that posed questions concerning a particular issue or relevant policy (questions of accountability and legitimacy).
Advice giving/helping	We measured *advice-giving/helping* based on the presence or absence of the following: posts aimed at helping/advising other participants.
Storytelling	We measured *storytelling* based on the presence or absence of the following: posts that tell a story/share experiences.
Social talk	We measured *social talk* based on the presence or absence of the following: posts containing chit-chat (e.g. greetings, banter), which did not involve any of the above-described behaviors.

Our approach draws from coding frameworks developed in the field of online deliberation (Graham 2008, 2009; Stromer-Galley 2007); see Friess and Eilders's (2015) overview of prominent frameworks used/developed in the field. Some of the earliest research on the internet and politics was the study of online political talk in non-institutional spaces through the lens of deliberative and public sphere ideals (see

Dahlberg 2004a). Evaluating the democratic quality of everyday online communicative practices (through which the public sphere is constituted) has been one of the most popular areas of research in online deliberation (see Graham 2015; Friess and Eilders 2015). Researchers here have constructed a set of normative conditions of public sphere discourse, which are then operationalized into measurable concepts and employed in empirical analyses. Habermas's work (1984, 1987, 1989, 1996), especially his theory of communicative rationality, has been highly influential in this process. Likewise, we evaluated the deliberativeness of political talk by operationalizing the following conditions: rational-critical debate (the level of *rationality*, *continuity*, and *convergence*); dispositional requirements for achieving mutual understanding (*reciprocity* and *sincerity*); and the norms of debate (*discursive equality*).[3]

However, simply focusing on the deliberativeness of political talk ignores it's everyday, informal nature. Moreover, despite the theoretical developments on the civic value of, for example, story-telling, humor, and emotions and rhetoric, typical ingredients of everyday talk, procedural and substantive rationality still dominates; see Coleman and Moss's (2012, 6-7) critique of the field. Thus, we moved beyond the normative framework of deliberation to capture different communicative practices of online political talk. Given that much of the literature in the field focuses on Western liberal democracies, we carried out a pilot study to develop a more grounded coding scheme. During this phase, we employed qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000) – utilizing deductive and inductive coding techniques – to modify and develop (new) categories for social-civic forms of communication that emerged. This resulted in five coding categories: complaining, questioning, storytelling, advice-giving/helping, and social talk.

To increase confidence in the findings, an inter-coder reliability test was conducted. The test was carried out by two coders on a random sample of approximately 20% of the posts. Calculated using Scott's Pi, coefficients met appropriate acceptance levels ranging from .70 to .92.

Findings

Normative conditions of deliberation

The first indicator under investigation was rationality – the extent to which opinion expressions were supported by reasoning and the use of external evidence. It was assessed by calculating the number of reasoned claims in relation to the total number of claims made. As Table 3 indicates, expressing a position or stating a claim accounted for roughly two-thirds of the *Qiangguo Luntan* posts (66.1%). Slightly more than half of these posts (34.1%) provided facts and sources to support claims, while assertions were slightly less frequent at 32%. In other words, *Qiangguo Luntan* participants often expressed their opinions about public health issues backed up by reasoning and external evidence. *Tieba* users expressed viewpoints less frequently compared to *Qiangguo Luntan* users, representing 45.1% of *Tieba* posts. Their opinions were slightly less rational than those of *Qiangguo Luntan* users. Opinion expression was even less frequent on *Yaolan*, representing 42.8% of all posts. Unlike *Qiangguo Luntan* and *Tieba* participants, opinions were primarily expressed using assertions, accounting for 30.1% of all posts compared to 12.7% for reasoned claims.

Table 3. Indicators of Deliberation.

Indicator	Qiangguo Luntan (N=610)	Tieba (N=1096)	Yaolan (N=472)
Reasoned claims	34.1	21.4	12.7
Non-reasoned claims	32.0	23.7	30.1
Reciprocity (Replies)	12.8	57.6	69.9
Continuity	6.7	19.7	0.0
Convergence	0.0	0.8	0.0
Questionable sincerity	0.0	0.0	0.0
Degrading	1.5	4.7	0.0

Note: We used chi-square tests to conduct significance testing for differences across forums. Only the results of key indicators of deliberation are listed:

For claims, χ^2(2, N=2178) =83.24, p< .001; For reciprocity, χ^2(2, N=2178) =434.24, p< .001; For continuity, fisher's exact test was conducted, p< .001.

The second indicator was reciprocity, which requires participants to read and respond to each other's posts. As Table 3 reveals, the level of replies was low in *Qiangguo Luntan*, accounting for 12.8% of posts. However, reciprocity was much higher in both the commercial and non-political forums. On *Tieba*, replies represented 57.6% of the sample while on *Yaolan* roughly 70% of posts were replies. The results suggest that when netizens talk about healthcare issues in less 'political' spaces, which primarily have a social purpose and are grounded in everyday life, they engage more with each other, (potentially) fostering an online community.

The next indicators were continuity and convergence, which require that the exchange of claims continue until understanding or some form of agreement

(convergence) is achieved. The level of extended debate refers to the frequency of continued interaction between participants via the use of arguments. We identified strong-strings, i.e., continued exchange of reasoned claims within threads. The level of extended debate was measured by calculating the number of posts in strong-strings. As Table 3 shows, only 6.7% of the posts were part of extended political debates on *Qiangguo Luntan*. Moreover, none of these exchanges ended in convergence. Extended debate among participants only occurred when it involved a controversial policy proposal or healthcare regulation. On *Tieba*, exchange of claims was relatively frequent, accounting for almost one-fifth of posts. For example, two *Tieba* users actively engaged in public debates about the new cooperative medical system which requires an increase of prepayment from rural citizens to cover more health services (Figure 1):

A: "[…] It seems that the policy does not benefit us."

B A: "You do not need to buy the new health insurance if you think it is not good for you. This is not compulsory."

A: "The local government can not cancel the social welfare initiated by the state but they can force rural citizens to withdraw health insurance by raising the prepayment." […] It is soft coercion."

However, extended debate rarely led to the convergence of opinions. In contrast to *Tieba*, political talk on *Yaolan* rarely developed into extended debates and no posts were coded as convergence.

Figure 1. An Extended Debate from *Tieba*

The fifth indicator, sincerity, was measured by identifying acts of questionable sincerity and gauging the extent to which participants doubt/challenge the truthfulness/sincerity of other participants. Table 3 shows that no posts were coded as questionable sincerity, suggesting that participants' posts were perceived as sincere in all three forums. There is a caveat, however, as our analysis cannot detect the potential presence of hired online commentators (water/fifty-cent army). Such commentators are, of course, likely to speak in seemingly sincere ways to persuade common netizens to accept their pro-government ideas (Han 2015b).

Discursive equality, our sixth indicator, requires participants to respect, recognize, and treat each other equally. Thus, posts were coded for instances when participants actively degraded someone's character, quality, esteem, or rank. Table 3 reveals that only 1.5% of posts on *Qiangguo Luntan* were degrading, suggesting a high-level of civility among participants. On *Tieba*, 4.7% of posts contained degrading comments, typically directed at people with opposing political views. However,

degrading comments often led recipients to post reasoning and evidence to support their claims, thus increasing the level of rationality and extended debate. In other words, although uncivil behaviors were exhibited, they did not necessarily harm public debate on *Tieba*. Finally, no posts were coded as degrading on *Yaolan*. Overall, acts of inequality in all three forums were infrequent.

Social-civic communicative practices

Complaining allows citizens to express concerns, functioning as a form of citizens' dialogue with powerful institutions. It is a type of civic behavior through which citizens attempt to indirectly push people exerting power or authority to enact social changes. Given the lack of direct channels for Chinese citizens to influence and participate in political decision-making, mass complaining online is an indirect force for political change in the internet era. Questioning is another way for Chinese citizens to criticize authorities and pressure them into tackling social problems.

Table 4. Social-Civic Communicative Practices

Civic behavior	Qiangguo Luntan (N=610)	Tieba (N=1096)	Yaolan (N=472)
Complaining	32.1	16.1	15.9
Questioning	3.6	0.3	0.6
Advice-giving/helping	0.5	3.5	13.6
Storytelling	7.0	20.7	29.7
Social talk	4.4	6.7	10.2

As Table 4 indicates, complaining and questioning were most common on the political forum *Qiangguo Luntan,* representing 32.1% and 3.6% of the posts respectively. More than half of the posts coded as complaining were used in conjunction with reasoned claims or assertions to express critical views on public health issues. Participants voiced their grievances about the marketization of healthcare services, unethical practices and corruption in the healthcare system, and the unequal distribution of medical resources. *Qiangguo Luntan* participants engaged in daily resistance against injustices by claiming health rights via direct public grievances about the government's inability to adequately address problems. At the same time, they used their complaints to express patriotic feelings towards the nation-state. This nationalist discourse does not appear to undermine the state or citizens' civic claims; rather, it strengthens the idea of enhancing national interest by improving social welfare in public health. For instance, a participant posted a message about the lack of health insurance for older adults in rural China, while simultaneously stating that he was praying for China (Figure 2).

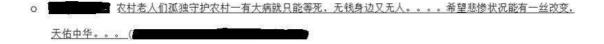○ ▮▮▮▮▮ 农村老人们孤独守护农村一有大病就只能等死，无钱身边又无人。。。。希望悲惨状况能有一丝改变，天佑中华。。。(▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

Figure 2. An Example from *Qiangguo Luntan*

Indirect counter-hegemonic discourse was applied in this example of a complaint.

The national discourse emphasizes the public interest and challenges the legitimacy of local authorities when their actions run counter to the (perceived) public interest. However, it still conveys trust towards the party-state as participants sought solutions from the central government, for local injustices in healthcare policy that accommodated citizens' appeals into the legitimacy of the state.

On *Tieba*, 16.1% of posts were complaints. Nearly a quarter (22%) were expressed in combination with opinion expression (reasoned and non-reasoned claims). Unlike *Qiangguo Luntan*, 23.2% of coded complaints were expressed via the speech act of storytelling. Aggrieved citizens used personal experiences to complain about healthcare policies and unethical practices in hospitals. This fostered more radical criticism and posed a direct challenge to the legitimacy of government policies. For example, one participant complained about the newly imposed healthcare policy in rural areas, "Citizens do benefit from early healthcare policies; however, the continuously increasing healthcare costs have become a financial burden for many families. President Xi, your healthcare policies are not being well implemented" (Figure 3).

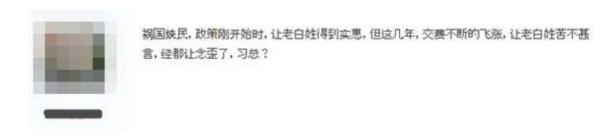祸国殃民,政策刚开始时,让老白姓得到实惠,但这几年,交费不断的飞涨,让老白姓苦不甚言,经都让念歪了,习总?

Figure 3. An Example of Complaint from *Tieba*

Similar to on *Qiangguo Luntan*, citizens – thru complaining – called on the central government to take action on *Tieba* when expressing complaints at the local level. They asked for the involvement of the central government as a separate power from local authorities, thus contributing to the sustainment of regime legitimacy in China.

Complaints accounted for 15.9% of posts on *Yaolan*. They expressed dissatisfaction regarding doctors' inappropriate treatment of patients, the government's failure to monitor vaccine safety, and patients' mobility across healthcare regions. Similar to *Tieba*, participants often expressed complaints via (personal) narratives about the injustices they encountered. This accounted for nearly a third of complaints (29.3%). For example, a participant posts: "As Moms, we are very worried about the quality of vaccines […]; we hope [central government] authorities can put more efforts into overseeing vaccine manufacturers" (Figure 4).

女宝5岁5个月13天

发表于 ▬▬ ▬▬ | 只看该作者

回复:【每周讨论第六期】-疫苗之殇

现在的疫苗失去了原先护体的功能,反而变相的伤害宝贝
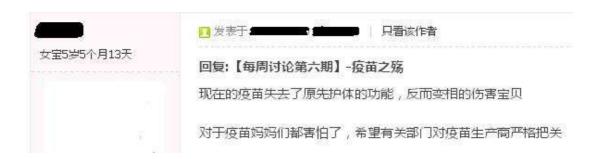
对于疫苗妈妈们都害怕了,希望有关部门对疫苗生产商严格把关

Figure 4. An Example of Complaint from *Yaolan*

As this example illustrates, *Yaolan* participants 'scaled-up' by connecting their personal concerns to the public interest through mundane complaining. Participants thus problematized their everyday struggles with public health as a socio-political issue. But, they were less likely to connect their personal experiences to the structural cause of the problem, rarely blaming the government. Therefore, the complaints were not conventional counter-hegemonic discourse as they lacked subversive resonance and posed no challenge to the state's legitimacy. Besides, participants tended to appeal to the government to solve public health problems, still trusting and relying on the power of state authorities as the example illustrates.

Although participants on all three forums actively discussed healthcare politics by complaining, diverse discursive forms were employed to express daily grievances. This reflects the complexities of Chinese citizenship and how tensions between state and society play out on different platforms.

Aside from these discursive behaviors, other communicative practices of civic virtue also emerged during political talk about public health issues. On occasion, participants advised or helped others. As Table 4 shows, this happened more frequently on *Yaolan* (13.6% of posts) than on the other forums. By joining this interactive process, *Yaolan* participants turned personal troubles with the healthcare system into common problems facing the larger public. Such advice-giving and information dissemination seemed to create a more informed community of participants. This, in turn, generated cooperative and collective forms of civic agency to solve common

23

problems. Moreover, an attitude of helping each other seemed to build trust and friendly social relations among *Yaolan* participants.

Storytelling, a common way of making sense of the world, was another identified communicative behavior. This was most prominent on *Tieba* (20.7%) and *Yaolan* (29.7%), but relatively scarce on *Qiangguo Luntan*. Storytelling was a reciprocal affair on *Tieba* and *Yaolan*; replies accounted for 55.9% and 76.4% of posts respectively. Such interpersonal conversations not only seemed to enable and encourage participants to discuss healthcare issues, but they also created a friendly atmosphere that helped to form and sustain social connections. The public sharing of personal experiences allowed for the construction of a 'collective experience', which, in turn, fostered political agency regarding the symbolic, social, and behavioral aspects of civic engagement.

As discussed, storytelling was a process of articulation that opens people's personal experiences and concerns in everyday life. For instance, a *Yaolan* participant shared her difficult experience of making an appointment with the doctor at a public hospital, making her individual problem visible in a broader public realm (Figure 5). In this case, the speech act of storytelling facilitated opening private life in a public arena, but it is not contestatory, without explicitly opposing power agencies.

女宝6岁6个月11天

发表于 2013-04-12 14:47:05 | 只看该作者

回复:预约挂号太可怕了！

儿童医院好多号都是预约都没有的，给孩子看个病真是太不容易了

Figure 5. An Example of Storytelling from *Yaolan*

Finally, political talk on healthcare issues sometimes developed into social talk. This accounted for 6.7% and 10.2% of *Tieba* and *Yaolan*'s posts respectively. For example, in a thread about tensions between doctors and patients, two participants shared their experiences as doctors, which eventually turned into chit-chat. Although not explicitly political, such social conversations facilitated connections and bonding among participants, strengthening their sense of belonging to the online community.

Discussion

The three online forums under investigation provided distinct settings for Chinese citizens to talk and engage in public health issues. We argue that different discursive spaces were opened up on the three forums through different forms of communication. Our comparative study reveals, in particular, the potential of non-political forums to foster relatively autonomous spaces for citizens to share life experiences and discuss public health issues. The findings confirm existing research positing that non-political spaces are highly significant for political engagement (Graham et al. 2015, 2016).

Regarding RQ1, we find that, in most cases, political talk in these online spaces did not meet the conditions of deliberation outlined by Habermas's public sphere theory. The results align with Medaglia and Yang's (2016) findings on public deliberation in another Chinese online forum: online discussions do not show key features of deliberation. The government-run forum guided debate by publishing explicitly political topics such as public health-related policies and news. These were posted mostly by its staff in a bid to elicit input on how to implement relevant policies rather than giving citizens influence in policymaking. As a top-down forum for gauging public opinion, pre-moderation was implemented. It opened up very little space for

personal experiences and concerns. Moreover, talk about public health issues did not foster an exchange of views, although there was a high level of rationality when presenting claims. This unidirectional feedback by citizens demonstrates the 'consultative' nature of political talk on this forum. Citizens mostly used the forum to familiarize the state with issues they encountered and to suggest solutions.

Surprisingly, we found that public deliberation emerged more freely in the non-political online space (*Tieba*) where the agenda was not subject to direct centralized control. It was this commercial-lifestyle forum and not the explicitly political or apparently non-political forums where deliberative practices were most common. *Tieba* also operates under pre-moderation rules. However, as a commercial-lifestyle forum, it requires moderators to find a balance between censorship policies and commercial forces and public concerns. This leaves citizens more room for public expression. On *Tieba*, political talk about public health issues often emerged from posts about everyday troubles. Citizens were more willing to discuss issues they felt needed to change. Through its aims, commercial ambition, and social atmosphere, *Tieba* links the political with the personal, mixing politics with lifestyle matters, thus bridging the private-public divide. Granting citizens' freedom to put private issues onto the political agenda, this everyday social space has further democratized "communication of information in Chinese society" (Tai 2006, 289). Indeed, it was not uncommon for disputes and different opinions to emerge, generating rational-critical debates among participants.

The non-political (commercial-topical) forum *Yaolan* offers citizens a space for more interpersonal conversations about public health issues. Despite this, it did not foster rational-critical debate. A closer analysis revealed that personal concerns and views were often aligned with the communal interest and shared values on the forum.

The ways the *Yaolan* community interacted was influenced by communitarian norms based on neo-Confucian values which place the pursuit of the common good over the expression of self-interest (He 2014). The communal communicative practices are more appropriate for responding to the concerns and interests expressed by *Yaolan* participants than Western-style deliberation.

Regarding RQ2, we found that when ordinary citizens discussed public health issues, it triggered various social-civic communicative practices beyond the framework of deliberation. Although *Qiangguo Luntan* does not support citizens' deliberative practices, it is a space where participants engage in informal forms of (indirect) resistance to the state, i.e., complaining and questioning. Citizens challenge the legitimacy of certain policies but conform to a nationalist discourse rooted in a broader notion of public interest. In other words, they may talk critically about public health, but simultaneously downplay their criticism towards the state.

Tieba and *Yaolan* participants frequently engaged in advice-giving, helping, storytelling, and social talk, using personal experiences to address broader political problems. They did not explicitly aim to influence government healthcare policies; rather, they used the forums to talk about their personal healthcare problems. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), personal communicative practices open to diverse forms of reasoning can preserve space for ordinary citizens to articulate their particular experiences and concerns. In this study, *Tieba* and *Yaolan* participants' self-expression via storytelling, asking for or giving advice, or complaints served as communicative agency to frame social reality and transform personal troubles into public issues.

As *Tieba* encourages its users to express their views, the communicative power generated via personal (social-civic) communicative practices, facilitates "the

evolutions of perspectives and opinions" (Conover and Searing 2005, 281). Moreover, social-civic communications strengthen civic and political socialization, which may promote effective deliberation. The *Tieba* findings support the assertion that informal political talk produces the social-civic preconditions for citizens to participate in public deliberation (Kim and Kim 2008; Marques and Maia 2010).

Because *Yaolan* is devoted to self-help in parenting, childcare, and related lifestyle issues, it was no surprise that it had the highest levels of advice-giving, helping, storytelling, and social talk, common communicative practices (when talking politics) in self-help forums (Graham and Wright 2014; Graham et al. 2015, 2016). Through these social-civic forms of communication, participants learned about the lives of others and sought common ground, making visible personal concerns about public health. It is noteworthy that they employed non-resistant discursive forms, without confronting power agencies, to transform their personal experiences into political issues. Nevertheless, by providing a social, collaborative space for citizens to figure out problems, present concerns, and explore solidarity, *Yaolan* revealed significant civic value. Thus, the findings reaffirm the multiple functions of everyday talk, although it may not serve the goal of public deliberation (Conover and Searing 2005).

Regarding RQ3, each of our three forums opened up a distinct discursive space for citizens to engage in politics. The government-led *Qiangguo Luntan* maintained a model of consultation with limited deliberation. However, it did provide opportunities for citizens to complain and bring issues to the state's attention. It thus created an online space that enabled criticism of local governments and policies while maintaining consensus with the state. Conversely, the open and inclusive talk on *Tieba* and *Yaolan* fostered "online third spaces" (Wright, 2012), and more autonomous and new discursive

spaces came into being for citizens to engage in public health politics. On the commercial-lifestyle forum (*Tieba*), people discussed public health issues in both deliberative and social-civic ways. This not only sustained a virtual civic community but was also an incubator of deliberative and participatory practices. Finally, as a commercial-topical forum, *Yaolan*'s self-governing community encouraged participants to pursue common interests and shared values via non-argumentative communications, beyond the ideals of deliberation, by referencing their personal experiences.

Conclusion

Based on our findings, we contend that the social-civic forms of communication largely constitute an (emerging) online public sphere in the everyday life context, while deliberation was not the central activity in the three forums under censorship rules. This suggests that under direct or indirect internet censorship, conventional (Western-style) deliberation directly involving conflictual and resistant attitude against state authorities is not embraced by Chinese citizens in everyday online settings. However, communal and less confrontational forms of discourse are important for the proto-political talk to turn political, thus serving as prerequisite conditions for the emergence of an online public sphere. Second, the way citizens extended the boundaries of public spaces on the forums was shaped by the characteristics of each platform. On the political forum, indirect counter-hegemonic discourses were applied by participants to express political concerns, while keeping a safe distance from the state. Differently, on the non-political forum, communal discourses (via social-civic communications) not focusing on antagonism, without explicitly involving power agencies, were dominant, expanding the scope of the political. The non-confrontational nature of the political talk on the forums

implies that state-society dynamics are more cooperative than oppositional under China's consultant authoritarianism.

The online public sphere emerging from everyday political talk in our study reflects the patriarchal nature of China's consultant authoritarianism (Teets 2014). There is a lack of rational-critical debate that confront the power of government but the expression of public opinion via social-civic communications that are not directly anti-government is encouraged. Under the authoritarianism, the online public sphere functions more to inform the government than foster political debates that directly challenges the existing rule of the government, thereby, in a harmonious relationship with the state. Based on the analysis, we argue that to explain how the public sphere emerges in everyday (non-political) spaces in China, the conceptual operationalization of the public sphere needs to be extended to include communal discursive forms. They express civic values though not central to the confrontational process of rational debates.

Notes

1. More specifically, we drew from three broad sources of knowledge when developing the keyword list: a) our personal knowledge of public health in China; b) academic research and news media coverage; c) and our knowledge of the forums themselves (e.g., thru dozens of hours exploring the forums).

2. Threads were initially collected during 2015. However, for two forums, we had to extend the time-frame to 2013 to allow for the collection of 25 threads as a means of maintaining the comparability of our sample.

3. For a more comprehensive specification and discussion of the public sphere criteria – the normative conditions of deliberation used here – see Graham (2009). Similarly, see Dahlberg's (2004b) comprehensive set of normative conditions of public sphere discourse, which draws from Habermas's theory of communicative rationality.

References

Balla, Steven J. 2014. "Health system reform and political participation on the Chinese
    Internet." *China Information* 28(2): 214-236.

Bennett, W. Lance, and Alexandra Segerberg. 2012. "The logic of connective action:
    Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics." *Information,
    Communication & Society* 15(5): 739-768.

CNNIC. 2017. "The 40th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China." *China
    Internet Network Information Center*. http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/.

Coleman, Stephen. 2007. "Mediated Politics and Everyday Life." *International Journal
    of Communication* 1(1): 49-60.

Coleman, Stephen, and Giles Moss. 2012. "Under Construction: The Field of Online
    Deliberation Research." 9(1):1-15.

Conover, Pamela Johnston, and Donald D. Searing. 2005. "Studying 'everyday political
    talk' in the deliberative system." *Acta Politica* 40(3): 269-283.

Damm, Jens. 2007. "The Internet and the fragmentation of Chinese society." *Critical
    Asian Studies* 39(2): 273-294.

Dahlberg, Lincoln. 2004a. "Net-public sphere research: Beyond the 'first phase'."
    Javnost - The Public 11(1): 27-43.

Dahlberg, Lincoln. 2004b. "The Habermasian public sphere: A specification of the
    idealized conditions of democratic communication." *Studies in Social and
    Political Thought* 10(10): 2-18.

Friess, Dennis, and Christiane Eilders. 2015. "A systematic review of online deliberation research." *Policy & Internet* 7(3): 319-339.

Gleiss, Marielle Stigum. 2015. "Speaking up for the suffering (br)other: Weibo activism, discursive struggles, and minimal politics in China." *Media, Culture & Society* 37(4): 513–529.

Graham, Todd. 2008. "Needles in a haystack: A new approach for identifying and assessing political talk in nonpolitical discussion forums." *Javnost – The Public* 15(2): 17–36.

Graham, Todd. 2009. "What's Wife Swap Got to Do with It?: Talking Politics in the Net-based Public Sphere." PhD diss., University of Amsterdam.

Graham, Todd. 2015. "Everyday political talk in the Internet-based public sphere." In *Handbook of Digital Politics*, ed. by Stephen Coleman, and Deen Freelon, 247–263. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Graham, Todd, Daniel Jackson, and Scott Wright. 2015. "From everyday conversation to political action: Talking austerity in online 'third spaces.'" *European Journal of Communication* 30(6): 648–665.

Graham, Todd, Daniel Jackson, and Scott Wright. 2016. "'We need to get together and make ourselves heard': Everyday online spaces as incubators of political action." *Information, Communication & Society* 19(10): 1373–1389.

Graham, Todd, and Scott Wright. 2014. "Discursive equality and everyday talk online: The impact of 'super-participants.'" *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 19(3): 625–642.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1984. *The Theory of Communicative Action (trans. Thomas McCarthy). Vol. 1, Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1987. *Theory of Communicative Action (trans. Thomas McCarthy). Vol. 2, Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (trans. Thomas Burger)*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1996. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy (trans. William Rehg)*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Han, Rongbin. 2015a. "Defending the authoritarian regime online: China's "voluntary fifty-cent army"." *The China Quarterly* 224: 1006-1025.

Han, Rongbin. 2015b. "Manufacturing Consent in Cyberspace: China's' Fifty-Cent Army'." *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44(2): 105-134.

He, Baogang. 2014. "Deliberative culture and politics: The persistence of authoritarian deliberation in China." *Political Theory* 42(1): 58-81.

Jiang, Min. 2010. "Authoritarian deliberation on Chinese Internet." *Electronic Journal of Communication* 20(3&4): 7-39.

Kornreich, Yoel, Ilan Vertinsky, and Pitman B. Potter. 2012. "Consultation and deliberation in China: the making of China's health-care reform." *China Journal* 68(2): 176–203.

Kalathil, Shanthi, and Taylor C. Boas. (2003). *Open networks, closed regimes: The impact of the Internet on authoritarian rule*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

King, Gary, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts. 2013. "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression." *American Political Science Review* 107(2): 326-343.

Kim, Joohan, and Eun Joo Kim. 2008. "Theorizing dialogic deliberation: Everyday political talk as communicative action and dialogue." *Communication Theory* 18(1): 51-70.

Kligler-Vilenchik, Neta. 2015. "From wizards and house-elves to real-world issues: Political talk in fan spaces." *International Journal of Communication* 9: 2027-2046.

Lewis, Orion A. 2013. "Net inclusion: new media's impact on deliberative politics in China." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43(4): 678-708.

Liu, Yuanli. 2009. "Reforming China's health care: for the people, by the people?" *The Lancet* 373(9660): 281-283.

Liu, Jun. 2017. "From 'moments of madness' to 'the politics of mundanity'-researching digital media and contentious collective actions in China." *Social Movement Studies* 16(4): 418-432.

MacKinnon, Rebecca. 2011. "China's" networked authoritarianism"." *Journal of Democracy* 22(2): 32-46.

Mansbridge, Jane 1999. "Everyday Talk in the Deliberative System." In *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*, ed. Stephen Macedo, 211-239. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mayring, Philipp. 2000. "Qualitative content analysis." *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 1(2).

Marques, Ângela CS, and Rousiley CM Maia. 2010. "Everyday conversation in the deliberative process: An analysis of communicative exchanges in discussion groups and their contributions to civic and political socialization." *Journal of Communication* 60(4): 611-635.

Medaglia, R., & Yang, Y. (2017). Online public deliberation in China. *Information, Communication & Society* 20(5): 733-753.

Papacharissi, Zizi. 2010. *A private sphere: Democracy in a digital age*. Polity.

Ramesh, M., Xun Wu, and Alex Jingwei He. 2013. "Health governance and healthcare reforms in China." *Health policy and planning* 29(6): 663-672.

Schlæger, Jesper, and Min Jiang. 2014. "Official microblogging and social management by local governments in China." *China Information* 28(2): 189-213.

Stromer-Galley, Jennifer. 2007. "Measuring deliberation's content: A coding scheme." *Journal of public deliberation* 3(1):12.

Tai, Zixue. 2006. *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society*. London: Routledge.

Teets, Jessica C. 2014. *Civil Society under Authoritarianism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wyatt, Robert O., Elihu Katz, and Joohan Kim. 2000. "Bridging the spheres: Political and personal conversation in public and private spaces." *Journal of Communication* 50(1):71-92.

Wright, Scott. 2012. "From "third place" to "third space": Everyday political talk in non-political online spaces." *Javnost-the public*, 19(3): 5-20.

Wright, Scott. 2018. "The impact of 'super-participants' on everyday political talk." *Journal of Language and Politics* 17(2): 155-172.

Wright, Scott, Todd Graham, and Dan Jackson. 2015. "Third Space, Social Media, and Everyday Political Talk." In *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics*, ed. by Axel Bruns, Gunn Enli, Eli Skogerbo, Anders Olof Larsson, and Christian Christensen, 74-88. New York: Routledge.

Yang, Guobin. 2009. *The power of the Internet in China: Citizen activism online*. Columbia University Press.

Yang, Guobin. 2003. "The co-evolution of the Internet and civil society in China." *Asian Survey* 43(3): 405-422.

Yang, Guobin. 2007. "How do Chinese civic associations respond to the internet?" *The China Quarterly* 189(1): 122-143.

Zheng, Yongnian, and Guoguang Wu. 2005. "Information technology, public sphere, and collective action in China." *Comparative Political Studies* 38(5): 507-536.

Zhang, Weiyu. 2010. "Technical capital and participatory inequality in eDeliberation" *Information, Communication & Society* 13(7): 1019-1039.