2. Deliberative Democracy, Political Talk, and the Everyday Sphere in Minjian

In response to the deliberative turn in political theory and the focus on participatory democracy in Western scholarship, scholars have begun to research how the internet may facilitate deliberation and political participation in China. This dissertation focuses on everyday political talk among citizens in online spaces outside the sphere of formal politics. This raises questions about how political talk can be conceptualized, analyzed, and assessed in social, political, and cultural contexts that differ greatly from Western democratic states. Thus, this chapter aims to provide a conceptual framework that allows us to make sense of political talk in China by building an analytical framework for empirical evaluation.

First, in Section 2.1, I begin by explaining the concept of deliberative democracy and discuss the deliberative system. Next, I discuss the concept of the (everyday) public sphere within the deliberative system. Then, I delve into the definition and characteristics of political talk, elaborating on its everydayness as a critique of formal deliberation.

In Section 2.2, I turn to China, arguing that political talk has an important role in overcoming the deliberative deficit and extending the public sphere. I introduce the concept of minjian (the autonomous social space in Chinese society) and discuss how it offers an alternative to the concept of the public sphere in civil society.

Based on the conceptualization of political talk I have mapped out in the previous sections, Sections 2.3 focus on how to analyze political talk in China. It proposes an inclusive analytical lens, which integrates the formal criteria of deliberation, while also taking into account the informal characteristics of everyday political talk rooted in the Chinese social-cultural context. Applying the analytical framework both within and beyond the conventional ideals of deliberation allows for a comprehensive examination of how social-civic culture rooted in the Chinese minjian shapes communicative practices, as well as comparing this to the formal standards of deliberation used in analyzing political talk in the context of Western liberal democracies. Finally, at the end of Section 2.3, I reflect on the benefits and limitations of the conceptual and analytical frameworks.
2.1 Deliberative democracy, the Public Sphere, and Political Talk

2.1.1 Deliberative democracy and deliberative system

The term ‘deliberative democracy’ highlights the importance of deliberation in collective decision-making. It refers to a participatory view of politics in which the communicative power of citizen interaction is connected with the real political power of the state. It argues that political decisions only achieve legitimacy when citizens have collectively debated them and have reached mutual understanding through a reflexive process of public reasoning (Elster, 1997, 1998; Cohen, 1989, 1996; Gutmann 1996; Fishkin 1991). It thus moves away from the liberal view that collective decision-making is rooted in the individual rights of voting and compromising among private interests based on majority rule.

Deliberative politics argue that the political process should be more than merely an aggregation of individual preferences. In a culture of deliberation, citizens are encouraged to expose and contrast their opinions and preferences with those of others. Most political theorists agree that the quality of public deliberation is of crucial importance for the legitimacy of collective decision-making. Grounded in Habermas’s theory of communicative theory of communicative action, Elster (1997) argues that citizens should engage in politics in a manner which goes beyond private expressions of self-interest. They should use rational arguments aimed at building consensus and the common good. Benhabib (1996) holds the belief that the legitimacy of decision-making is not determined by the number of votes but resides in plural spaces and networks of discursive deliberation. All citizens are allowed to articulate and exchange conflicting values and interests here, but in a reflexive way that is acceptable to all. Dryzek (2000), similarly, stresses the significance of the reflexive dimension of deliberation. He states that “deliberators are amenable to changing their judgements, preferences, and views during the course of their interactions, which involve persuasion rather than coercion, manipulation, or deception” (p.1).

Deliberative democracy is primarily put into practice in formal institutional settings. Deliberative initiatives range from deliberative polling to public hearings and citizen summits. It has a strong procedural (ideal) component and institutional arrangement in which rational discourse is systematically weighted. It focuses on topics of common good and aims to reach rational consensus (Cohen, 1989). Rather than focusing on single institutional sites for deliberation and only considering it as an instrument for
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legitimate decision-making, scholars such as Mansbridge emphasize the broader goals of deliberation.

Mansbridge (1999) introduces the “deliberative system”, which is defined as “a talk-based approach to political conflict and problem-solving — through arguing, demonstrating, expressing, and persuading” (Mansbridge et al., 2012, p.5). She argues that public deliberation should not be restricted to structured settings and should not only serve formal decision-making, such as in parliaments and other democratic institutions. According to Mansbridge, deliberation also takes place beyond formal settings in a variety of public arenas such as informal networks, the media, schools, and private institutions. Citizens engage here in everyday political talk and, based upon this, organize political actions. This allows us to think about how the wider society, citizens, and the people deliberate together in the public sphere. In the deliberative system as a whole, formal institutional forums and informal social arenas function independently but are also interconnected. As Mansbridge argues: “the different parts of the deliberative system mutually influence one another in ways that are not easy to parse out” (1999, 213).

The interconnections between these different domains can be traced back to Habermas’s two-track model of democracy. In his Between Facts and Norms (1996), he distinguishes between deliberation in the society-wide public sphere and institution-based formal settings. As envisioned by Habermas (1996), all the issues that impact citizens’ life should be talked about and deliberated among an engaged and active citizenry in the broader public sphere. This accumulates into public opinion formation about a certain social issue that lays the legitimate ground for authorities’ decision-making. In the west, elections, independent mass media, or autonomous civil society associations are usually the typical mechanisms to link the process of opinion-formation to the formal political institutions, transferring the communicative power from mass publics to the political power. Different from the case in Western countries, there is no independent mass media nor autonomous civil society in China; citizens do not have well-guaranteed channels to vote for elections. Thus, there are no formal or institutional mechanisms to link the public opinions formed in the Chinese public sphere with the formal political domain.

2.1.2 The Public Sphere

In the deliberative system, the place for informal deliberation among average citizens is the public sphere. Individual citizens here critically debate public affairs: “A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble
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to form a public body” (Habermas et al., 1974, p.49). It is an autonomous sphere of rational deliberation and opinion formation among citizens (Habermas, 1989). The function of the public sphere is to identify societal problems and be the intermediate entity between the political system and citizens’ lifeworld (Habermas, 1996). By the power of public opinion, citizens can influence the exercise of power by public authorities. As the public sphere emerges, a civil society, independent from the state, comes into being. It comprises the formal and informal associations and networks in the society to transmit the opinions formed in the public sphere to state institutions, pressing the government to serve the public interest (Habermas, 1996). Through civil society networks, public communication is institutionalized within organizations, speaking for the shared interests of citizens.

Habermas’s public sphere theory stresses the singularity of the bourgeois model of the public sphere evolving from the 17th century through the mid-20th century. Critics argue that this concept is overly absolute and unitary, and it ignores the emergence of alternative public spheres (Fraser, 1990; Dahlgren, 1991). Fraser (1990), for example, challenges Habermas’s emphasis on the universal basis of the public sphere, including the universal accessibility to all, the excessive rationality, and his normative claim to the public good, which should be reached. First, she argues that the single public sphere, which brackets social inequality, is exclusive on the basis of class, gender, and ethnicity. Women, the poor, and ethnic minorities are deprived of chances to enter the public sphere because it requires participants to possess the right resources, knowledge, and proper communicative capacity. Meanwhile, by making excessive rationality the universal form of communication in discursive interaction, the ideal public sphere ignores contestation and differences. It thus hides the power dynamics of domination and subordination and reinforces social inequality (Fraser, 1990; Dahlgren, 2006).

Fraser (1990) stresses that alternative public spheres where subaltern groups, social movement actors, and community members engage in discursive exchanges and develop political consciousness can exist in parallel with the bourgeois public sphere. In these separate social spaces, where no domination from privileged groups exists, members of subordinate groups have a discursive arena among themselves. Here they can discuss what they need/want and develop strategies to achieve their goals. The existence of alternative public spheres would facilitate the expression of difference in that everyone is “able to speak in one’s own voice, and thereby simultaneously to construct and express one’s cultural identity through idiom and style” (Fraser, 1990, p.69). Replying to this critique, in his later work Habermas (1992) has also departed from the idea of a single public sphere.
He here argued that the public sphere should be seen “as a complex network of publincs” (p.440) and admits the existence of multiple public spheres.

In line with Fraser’s idea of multiple public spheres, I argue that multiple everyday spheres exist. These are accessible and open to ordinary citizens, and thus offer alternatives to the dominant public sphere within civil society associations. The everyday public sphere is not a single realm in the literal sense, but an overarching concept that refers to the structural setting of multiple informal everyday (social) spaces. Unlike the elite public sphere, it represents a new structure for the interpretation of social reality and the organization of social experience. First, it serves as a discursive sphere for citizens to escape from the dominant public sphere to regroup, have internal discursive exchanges, and formulate interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. In other words, it acknowledges the emergence of multiple publics with different group identities and allows the negotiation and contestation among a variety of publics. Second, the everyday public sphere is the place where citizens meet and talk about affairs impacting their life beyond the focus of formal politics. Here, connections are established between citizens’ personal life experiences and the power structure existing in the wider society. Thus, in the everyday sphere, tensions between the micro-lifeworld and the macro-political system are reflected, represented, and negotiated. Moreover, it plays an intermediating role in disseminating one’s discourse to larger communities and the wider society. The everyday sphere’s emancipatory potential is often enabled through its interaction with the dominant public sphere and civil society.

2.1.3 Everyday political talk

At the heart of the public sphere is everyday political talk. In normative approaches that focus on formal, instrumental deliberation, rational-critical arguments are favored over other speech acts. In line with Habermas’s (1984) ideas about the “ideal speech situation”, it is argued that public discussions should aim at the public good. Deliberation should be rational and geared towards reaching consensus or agreement to benefit institutional decision-making (Benhabib, 1996; Elster, 1998; Cohen, 1989,1997; Gutmann, 1996; Fishkin, 1991). Rational deliberation is therefore implemented in formal or institutionalized settings, such as parliaments, citizen juries, public hearing meetings, and deliberative polls. In these deliberations about public issues that ultimately aim at making decisions, participants have to justify their ideas via the use of argument and reason based in the public interest. Critics point out that this ideal of public deliberation is biased and unrealistic because it narrows the topics of discussion to the common good (Mansbridge,
2010), excludes other forms of discursive practices (Dryzek, 2000), and overlooks affective dimensions of communication (Young, 1990b). As Dahlgren (2006) argues, “it banishes by definition that speech which may be on its way towards politics, speech which originates in the disjointed settings of everyday life and yet manages to join together experience and information, wisdom and reflection in ways that may lead to question, contestation, political conflict” (p.279).

Contrary to instrumental (formal) deliberation, everyday political talk in the informal public sphere is a spontaneous process. Here the political emerges from citizens’ casual and random everyday talk that has no predefined political aims. Its aim is not to produce consensus to serve any decision-making procedure but to share experiences and opinions, learn about issues that matter to people’s needs, reach mutual understanding if possible, and discuss the public good of the wider community. As said by Kim and Kim (2008), “citizens freely interact with one another to understand mutually the self and others, resulting in the production and reproduction of rules, shared values, and public reasons for deliberation” (p. 53).

Everyday political talk thus refers to a mundane talking activity in everyday social spaces, which has the potential to bridge citizens’ real-life experiences with the political process. It is an essential part of citizen involvement in the informal public sphere. Habermas (1984) argues that everyday political talk is “the archetype of communicative action”. He conceptualizes communicative action, as “the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations” (Habermas 1984, p. 85). These interpersonal relations, social interactions, and informal conversation such as “chatting, conversing, and arguing” (Habermas, 1984, p.327) provide a gateway to reaching mutual understanding and opinion-formation (Kim and Kim, 2008). More specifically, “it is through on-going participation in informal political talk whereby citizens become aware of other opinions, discover the important issues of the day, test new ideas, and develop and clarify their preferences” (Graham, 2015, p.2).

Responding to the deliberative deficit in the Western context, Dahlgren (2002) suggests that we need to adopt an empirical and real-world approach to deliberative democracy and the public sphere. He argues that everyday political talk plays a vital role in producing civic culture. This provides the precondition for citizen engagement in the public sphere. During political talk, speech emerges “which may be on its way towards politics, speech which originates in the disjointed settings of everyday life and yet manages to join together experience and information, wisdom and reflection in ways that may lead
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to question, contestation, political conflict” (Dahlgren, 2006, p.279). Drawing upon these ideas, I argue that everyday political talk rooted in the dynamics of people’s lifeworlds functions as a more inclusive model of citizen interaction. It brings the micro-interactional dynamics into force in the public sphere. In the following paragraphs, I elaborate on how the bottom-up approach to communicative action remedies the blind spots of the formal deliberation.

First, norms about the equality and inclusiveness of deliberative democracy may be best met in the informal public sphere of everyday talk. Here citizens who did not gather to debate about political issues in the first place, have conversations for the sake of conversation. Moreover, here people are included who do not necessarily talk in an ‘ideally deliberative’ manner. In his theory of “discursive democracy”, Dryzek (2000) supports a more inclusive position, attempting to overcome the strict limits of formal deliberation. He argues that deliberation should also include non-rational forms of communication such as rhetoric, humor, testimony, emotions, storytelling, and gossip. These go together with arguments in political talk. Similarly, Young (1996) argues that speech acts like greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling are more suitable than rational arguments for the expression of difference. With regards to the blind spots of formal deliberation pointed out above, political talk embraces multiple communicative forms and informal characteristics of speech, such as storytelling, narratives, humor, rhetoric, and esthetic-affective expressions. In this sense, it is more inclusive and more open to all citizens, regardless of social inequality and disparity in communicative competence.

Second, the dynamics between private matters and public issues become explicit in everyday political talk. Traditional concepts of deliberative democracy are constrained to discussions about matters of public concern or the common good. This position is questioned and criticized by democratic theorists, such as Fraser, Mouffe, Young, and Mansbridge. Rejecting that some illusory consensus on the common good exists, Fraser (1990) proposes that what is to be considered as a matter of common concern should be the outcome of a contestatory process and “no topics should be ruled off limits”. Mouffe (2000) argues that compromise among diverging interests and agonistic interaction between plural views are more compatible with the goal of deliberative democracy than consensus based on exclusion. Taking this one step further, Mansbridge et al. (2010) contend that self-interest, properly constrained, has a necessary role to play in the process of deliberation. “Including self-interest in deliberative democracy reduces the possibility of exploitation and obfuscation, introduces information that facilitates reasonable
solutions and the identification of integrative outcomes, and also motivates vigorous and creative deliberation”, which will eventually enhance the diversity of opinions (p.72-73). Barber (1984) concludes that the political motives of citizens are not pre-given but are derived from private desires and needs. Moreover, “the I of private self-interest can be conceptualized and reconstituted as a we that makes possible activity and common political action” (Barber, 1984, p.190).

By moving beyond the normative prerequisites of the concept of the public good, everyday political talk allows citizens to consider their self-interest and discover how their private concerns can be aligned (or not) with public issues and debates. The informal networks of everyday communication thus offer potential spaces for the emergence of political appeals based upon personal concerns. At the same time, these dispersed networks are accessible to a broad range of publics. Thus, the notion of an exclusionary deliberative public sphere is expanded into multiple public spheres in which the life experiences, interests, and conflicts concerning “subaltern counter-publics”, termed by Fraser (1990), can find their expression.

Third, critiquing Habermas’s narrow framing of public debate regarding cognition and reason, scholars argue for the important roles emotions and feelings play in communication (Rosenberg, 2006; Hoggett and Thompson, 2002). As Young (1990a) claims, “there is no place in his [Habermas’s] conception of linguistic interaction for the feeling that accompanies and motivates all utterances” (p.73). However, everyday political talk includes the affective dimensions of these interactions instead of only focusing on the rational-critical exchange of validity claims. Rosenberg (2006, p.93) emphasizes that, apart from rational motivation and cognitive capacity, “deliberation also requires conditions that foster emotional engagement, mutual nurturing, and an affective tie to one’s community”. Hoggett and Thompson (2002, p.114) also argue that emotions cannot be removed from the rational dimension of citizen interactions. They believe that “reason without passion is reason without energy or dynamism; for example, if cut off from aggression, reason lacks bite and sharpness”. Moreover, Schlesinger (1997, p.387) points out that it is necessary to appreciate the affective dimension of political involvement and identification because it is this non-rational dimension of feelings and sentiments that “confers a wider, non-deliberative sense of solidarity and belonging”. In a word, political discussions in the public sphere cannot exclude the affective dimensions of citizen interaction.
2.2 Authoritarian deliberation and the Chinese minjian

2.2.1 Public Deliberation and China

Moving beyond liberal democracies, China has been experimenting with deliberation-led participation in the policy-making process over the past two decades. For instance, public hearings have become an increasingly important instrument that is included by the central and local governments in decision-making processes on policy issues. Through these hearings, Chinese citizens can express their views about issues and make their voice heard before decision making. It is worth noting that public deliberation has primarily been adapted to serve practical functions such as enhancing the effectiveness of problem-solving and providing legitimacy for administrative governance, without any promise of regime-level democratization (e.g., multi-party competition or citizen empowerment). The emergence of deliberative practices in Chinese politics has been termed “authoritarian deliberation” (He and Warren, 2011): a deliberative approach to social conflicts without democratic empowerment.

Such a take on deliberation is quite different from views promoted in Western countries. Rather than cultivating and upholding liberal values such as personal rights, individual autonomy, and thus equality, public deliberation in China is channeled into the governance-level domain under the lead of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party). Since the reformation and the opening-up of China, there has been an increase in social conflicts, such as the growing gap between the rich and the poor, corruption, and environmental problems. Now that China has made massive progress in the economic realm, the social issues resulting from this have made political leaders increasingly worried about the legitimacy of their authoritarian rule. The waves of social unrest that arise from time to time have made the Chinese government consider implementing public deliberation as an alternative strategy to solve social conflicts. By introducing the mechanisms for public deliberation, social groups with diverse interests are offered the opportunity to express their voices through free dialogue, argument, and deliberation. This could, potentially, dampen conflicts between various interests, and simultaneously increase the legitimacy of policies and laws, and enhance (local) governance.

The deliberative approach has been applied to conflicts about policy issues in a variety of discussion venues ranging from the National People’s Congress, to urban deliberative institutions, to village-level meetings in rural areas. Some deliberative experiments have had a direct influence on decision-making. For instance, a deliberative
polling experiment that focused on the budget allocation for infrastructure projects in the Zeguo township of Wenling city was a successful example of giving citizens a say in local policy-making (Fishkin, 2011; He, 2006a). In this experiment, citizens were selected via random polling to engage in deliberation about how to allocate the city budget. The meetings were held without any officials being present to prevent political power from influencing the opinions of citizens. The outcome was taken into account in the official decision-making process. Another deliberative initiative is the Residential or Village Representative Assembly. It is a participatory and deliberative institution, which has introduced deliberative values on community-related issues in rural and urban governance (He, 2006a). More specifically, it is a deliberative mechanism for citizens to discuss controversial community-related issues in rural regions. It has opened up a channel for citizens to engage in the decision-making process about local issues such as the town budget and the use of collective land. Similarly, through the Residential Representative Assembly, citizens are able to voice their opinions on decisions impacting their lives, such as population control, security issues, or other daily matters.

The various deliberative and participatory experiments and practices in China have increased the local government’s capacity to deal with controversial issues and conflicts and also empowered citizens through the process of learning, debating, and exchanging ideas. It has equipped citizens with better communicative capacity (He, 2006). However, despite the positive changes deliberative practices have brought to administrative governance and citizen participation, there are limitations to the implementation of public deliberation in Chinese society. As pointed out by He and Warren (2011) in their characterization of authoritarian deliberation: there is “a high density of venues in which deliberation seems to exert influence, but within the context of government-defined agendas and formal government control of outcomes” (p.279). These modes of participation and deliberation do not lead to conditions that support the emergence of an autonomous public sphere, independent political organizations, independent oversight of power, or open-agenda meetings. The emerging deliberations here merely encourage the expression of differences in a limited way. As the deliberation agenda is set by the government, personal appeals and different interests not in line with the authoritative expectations will not be included. Thus, these types of deliberative initiatives exclude ‘alternative voices’ from the process.

As discussed above, state-organized deliberation in China adheres to the agenda, rules, and procedures predetermined by the state. If we only look at the institutional level,
the implementation of deliberative democracy has failed to realize its potential of engaging ordinary Chinese citizens to freely debate issues of the day impacting their lives. According to He (2006b), state-sponsored deliberation, for the most part, does not achieve a high level of authenticity. He suggests that to do so ordinary citizens actually need to be engaged. Because of the political constraints, a culture of deliberation will – at least in the short term – only emerge in the informal public sphere, the unofficial spaces in the social realm. In this study, the Western notion of deliberation is adapted to Chinese social-cultural backgrounds, opening up opportunities for citizens to participate politically.

Due to the limited scope of formal (authoritarian) deliberation in China, as demonstrated in the literature above, scholars have argued that, in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the development of deliberative democracy, we should look at the broader social-cultural sphere. Reflecting upon the current agenda of deliberation research on China, which puts emphasis on formal deliberation, Min (2014) further suggests that the current conceptualization of deliberation needs to be expanded to acknowledge more diverse forms of deliberation, being more sensitive to the local cultural system. Similarly, Sass and Dryzek (2014) acknowledge the influence of culture on deliberation. They consider political culture as “a residual category in deliberative theory” (p. 6) and argue that the web of meanings, symbols, and norms in which communicative actions are exercised determine their significance and political effects. In other words, the political consequences of citizen interaction are closely related to the specific socio-political context, the local culture, and political values.

The openness of deliberative culture as a concept enables us to capture how empirical categories that would not be considered salient in the (Western) normative sense might lead to effective deliberation in non-Western liberal democratic countries. To examine deliberative practices in the Chinese context, it is thus necessary to take the local deliberative culture into account. Therefore, I argue for shifting our attention to political talk – informal deliberation – in the everyday sphere of ordinary Chinese citizens. This allows us to locate citizen deliberation and civic engagement at the micro-level and improve our understanding of the micro-dynamics of daily democracy. Moreover, it enables us to explore how the particularities of Chinese culture impact deliberation. This helps to overcome the Western bias that is embodied in the normative notions of deliberative democracy and the public sphere.
2.2.2 Everyday political talk and the everyday sphere in Minjian

As Dryzek (2000, p.4) claims, civil society and the public sphere are the most important loci of deliberation through which citizens hold authorities accountable. The public opinion formed in the public sphere has the ultimate power to shape how civil society organizations monitor and even confront the state in serving the public good. In the Western model, informal public spheres tend to emerge through mass media and civil society networks. However, the informal (everyday) sphere in China does not necessarily guarantee publics the key to enter the formal public sphere, because there is no independent civil society or autonomous mass media which could link the everyday sphere to the sphere of formal politics in China. In the Western notion of the public sphere, civil society offers a counterweight to the state. Unlike the Western counterpart, a public sphere in between the state and society is not fully developed. The public realm existing in Chinese society is not composed of autonomous communicative structures as a separate space between state and society.

The public realm in the traditional Chinese society (the Qing (1644-1912), the Republic (1912-1949), until contemporary China) was termed as “third realm”. It has been conceptualized as an intermediate space between the state and society where social groups and the state meet and cooperate (Huang, 1993). In terms of autonomy, this third realm differs from the Western notion of civil society, which is separate from the state. In the 1980s, after the reformation and open-up policy, public intellectuals introduced the concept of civil society to China. Since then, Western sinologists and Chinese scholars have begun to study contemporary China through the lenses of civil society and the public sphere. In the initial phase, the concept of civil society stressed the creation of a modern Chinese citizenry. Turning the masses into citizens with civic awareness was one of the main goals of the state-imposed process of modernization. Emphasis was put on liberal values such as individual rights, freedom, and the rule of law (Ma, 1994). This civic transformation process was directed by the state and was aimed at creating a harmonious relationship between the state and civil society. But it also supported the official political ideology. In 1988, the party-state started a campaign to create a socialist citizenry, focusing on collectivism, the sacrifice of self-interest, and socialist civilization (Ma, 1994). Due to its dependence upon the state, civil society lost its neutral meaning when it got translated into the Chinese context.

At present, civil society, in the broad sense, is interpreted as people claiming citizenship, which demands protection of civil rights and civic responsibilities such as
volunteering (Chan, 2010). Narrowly speaking, it usually refers to the associations of civic groups such as NGOs and social organizations, aiming to promote public participation and social change. But still, all the civil society organizations operate under the political control of the Chinese government. Chan and Qiu’s (1999) study shows that those registered social organizations have little autonomy due to their cooperationist relationship with the Chinese government. Moreover, the horizontal interconnections between associations have also been prohibited by the vertical control from the state, undermining the rise of a real civil society in China.

Due to the lack of autonomy for civil society organizations, the associational networks of civil society are still not open to all subaltern political expressions. Therefore, not all voices are channeled through the networks of civil society into the communicative structure of the public sphere. Public discussion and political engagement are constrained in civil society and its public sphere. Moreover, the political views and activities of people who are not included in the state-led elite public sphere are ignored. This often happens to workers, peasants, and powerless citizens who constitute the majority of the Chinese population.

Scholars have argued that the current structures in civil society tends to privilege the elites and closes its doors to subaltern publics. Xing (2012) bluntly points out that public claims for modern-liberal ideas such as constitutional governance, civil rights, and legal system are exclusive and class-biased. Similarly, Zhao (2008) argues that the mediated public sphere is mainly open to views which are in line with the liberal-minded civil claims in favor of middle- and upper-class elites. She states that the citizenship status imposed upon ordinary Chinese individuals by the state without considering its underpinning social and political traditions, in itself, does not guarantee the peasants, workers, and other disfranchised ordinary individuals entry into the public sphere. As Chen (2003) argues, in the state-imposed process of modernization, the notions of civil society and citizenship were translated from the West but have not been effectively grounded in the local political culture of Chinese society. Without an autonomous and effective civil society, the popular discourses voiced by citizens in the everyday sphere are not necessarily transmitted to the formal public sphere via contestatory interaction among different publics as it happens in Western countries.

Because of the limitations of the public sphere in China, which is closely associated with the state-organized civil society, I argue that the everyday sphere offers an alternative. It fosters the emergence of “a form of public life in which multiple and unequal publics
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could participate” (Fraser, 1990, p.70). The notion of minjian offers a more nuanced conceptualization of the everyday sphere in China. Minjian is not outdated as a historical legacy; it still exists in relation to the modern state and civil society. In traditional China, before 1949, there was no separate sphere between state and society. Instead, Minjian society offered a relatively autonomous social space intermediating between state and society. It was made up of informal social relationships such as kinship, friendship, and guanxi (relationship-based) networks, through which everyday citizens are self-organized.

The everyday sphere in the Western deliberative system, offers a counterweight to the formal sphere of the state. In contrast, Minjian is not in binary opposition to the state but embodies the constant negotiation between the state and popular society. The everyday sphere in Chinese minjian plays an important role in connecting everyday citizens outside of civil society to public life, functioning as an agent of social change. Minjian is the unofficial social space, in which Chinese citizens talk about their everyday life experiences, express their political wills, and negotiate with civil society and the state. However, the discursive spaces that emerge from citizens’ communicative practices in minjian networks are not identical to the everyday sphere in the Western context. It implies a more harmonious relationship than the exchange of opposite views, which is promoted from a Western perspective. This dynamic has its roots in the imperial-feudal period when the state played a pastoral role. Here, the state is not to be confronted, but power citizens seek cooperation with, which leaves room for negotiatory relations. Therefore, the everyday practices in minjian go beyond the paradigm of hegemony and subversion.

Despite the state’s efforts to modernize the traditional society and to promote liberal-civic ideals, the cultural values and traditions from minjian society still exist (Chen, 2003). The mindsets nurtured in minjian are still part and parcel of the contemporary lifeworld of citizens and are guided by a logic different from the state’s modern-liberal pursuits. Taking the popular religious practice in local minjian society as an example, Nickerson (2001), for instance, suggests that popular religion tends to create a social place of its own, autonomous from the symbiotic relationship between the state and the civil society. Minjian is not organized by the state but has a fluid relation with civil society and the state. The minjian networks can be incorporated into formal organizations in civil society, but they may also remain informal. By being open to all publics, the informal sphere involving social forces situated in minjian is more inclusive than the conventional public sphere composed of elite civil society actors. That also means the everyday sphere in Chinese minjian is rather different from the public sphere in civil society. With all the
traditions inherited from ancient history and its close relation to citizens’ current everyday life, the everyday sphere in minjian has much significance in creating a more flexible, more dynamic, and more inclusive political society in China.

2.3 Normative conditions for deliberation

As described above, everyday political talk plays a crucial role in the broader deliberative system in Western countries. Moreover, it is even of greater significance in providing an autonomous sphere for Chinese citizens to practice citizen deliberation and engage in the political process. To study whether and how political talk lives up to deliberative and participatory ideals in the internet-based everyday sphere, we are in need of a critical analytical lens within and also beyond the classic deliberative framework to assess everyday political talk in China.

Although instrumental deliberation at the decision-making center and informal deliberation in the networks of everyday talk differ from each other in terms of participants, venues, and communicative styles, this does not imply any difference in the criteria for judging the quality of deliberation. The standards of deliberativeness do not change for different types of deliberation, but they are likely to be practiced at different degrees. Therefore, it is necessary to build a set of normative criteria for the process of deliberation to evaluate the deliberative quality of communicative practices, no matter where they take place. However, due to scholars’ inconsistent conceptualization of deliberation, there are still no fully consistent criteria to assess the quality of deliberation for empirical research (see, e.g., Elster, 1998; Benhabib 1996; Dryzek, 2000; Gutman, 1996; Mansbridge, 1999; Dahlberg, 2004; Graham 2008, 2009). Influenced by Habermas’s concept of communicative rationality and his notion of the public sphere, most deliberative theorists, however, do agree on the significance of open discussion, the importance of active citizen engagement, and the critical role of a vital public sphere (Gimmler, 2001). As argued by Dahlberg (2004), Habermas’s concept of communicative action and the general public sphere offer the most systematic critical theory addressing issues concerning mediatized society and modernity. Therefore, this section aims to build a set of normative criteria for the process of deliberation by drawing upon Habermas’s theory of communicative action and his notion of the public sphere.

Although the normative criteria of deliberation are rooted in the Western ideals of equality, individual rights, and empowerment, they still offer analytical implications to study citizen deliberation in China. By applying the normative lens of deliberation to assess
everyday political talk in Chinese online spaces, it is possible to see how participants express their ideas, deal with disagreements and engage in exchanges of preferences in a local socio-cultural context. A normative evaluation based on deliberative ideals can contribute to our understanding of the underlying social-cultural context in China and how this aligns or conflicts with Western deliberative ideals. This might lead to an alternative model of deliberation beyond the Western norms of deliberative democracy and the public sphere. Moreover, the normative analytical framework could facilitate future research in comparing how the deliberative norms are practiced in Eastern and Western contexts.

In addition to the normative assessment, it is necessary to take the local social-cultural norms into account for the examination of political talk. For instance, social harmony and civility have been promoted by the Confucian traditions in China and have a long history until now. The communicative reasoning influenced by the social harmony tradition is quite different from the privileged reasoning culture in the West, which values individual speech and opinion expression exemplified in Habermas’s idea of the public sphere. This echoes Rosenberg’s (2006) argument that the social conditions of communicative practices and the structure of communication that participants are exposed to also have an impact on individuals’ capacity of reasoning. Thus, to empirically study this dialogic way of deliberation in the everyday sphere of Chinese minjian, it is necessary to develop an inclusive analytical framework which expands the normative dimensions of deliberation to the informal characteristics of ordinary conversations in the everyday living context of Chinese citizens. Therefore, I attempt to build a comprehensive analytical framework both within and beyond the deliberative norms in the following paragraphs. In the next section, I first set-out the normative criteria deduced directly from Habermas’s concept of the public sphere and theories of deliberative democracy.

2.3.1 The normative conditions for the process of deliberation

As criticized by Fraser (1990) in Section 2.4, the ideals of the bourgeois public sphere (Habermas, 1989) are inadequate to address problems in modern societies. To improve his theory of the public sphere, Habermas developed the concept of ‘communicative rationality’ in his theory of communicative action. Here, he shifted the emphasis from the mode of rationality relying on subjective consciousness to an intersubjective vision of reasoning. In other words, rationality is developed through communicative interactions rather than determined by the communicative capacity of individuals. Moving beyond the historical context of the bourgeois society, now it is communicative action (the process of deliberation) that plays a central role in the formation of a communicative space for the
emergence of shared understanding and public opinion. Based on Habermas’s theory of communicative action, the public sphere refers to a social space where citizens engage in the exchange of arguments about matters of common concern, aiming at a shared understanding of the discussed issues. As the guiding criteria of communicative action, the concept of communicative rationality consolidated the normative basis of his public sphere theory and laid the foundation for deliberative democracy.

Communicative action was defined by Habermas (1984) as “the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success [instrumental or strategic action] but through acts of reaching understanding” (p. 285-286). Here, language use as a medium of coordination is intrinsically oriented towards reaching shared understandings between interlocutors. According to the theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984), participants can reach mutual understanding about a certain situation by giving reasons to support what they say. The presumption is that their statements could be reasonably justified. Specifically, effective communicative action requires involved participants to orient themselves into “intersubjective recognition of validity claims” by means of providing reasons to make their arguments acceptable to others (Habermas, 1984, p.14). This intersubjective give and take of validity claims then leads to progressive mutual modification of arguments, thus enabling participants to reach a common understanding of the situation.

More precisely, speakers need to meet at least three types of validity claims implicitly or explicitly in their reason-giving. These are claims to truth of propositions, claims to the rightness of norms and action, and claims to subjective truthfulness or sincerity of expressions (Habermas, 1984, 17-24, 38-39). To put it simply, a validity claim means that a statement made by someone is true, right, and truthful. In the back-and-forth of exchanges, these validity claims can be accepted, criticized, or refuted, depending upon the extent to which the speaker is able to make his or her arguments justified. If the validity claims in one’s statement appear problematic to the audience, the speaker will be challenged to give reasons. This involves a process of argumentation, in Habermas’s terms (1984). He refers to rationality as the “intersubjective recognition of criticizable validity claims” in argumentation (p.17). In the process of argumentation, “participants thematize contested validity claims and attempt to vindicate or criticize them through arguments” to convince others in discourse (Habermas, 1984, p.18). In a nutshell, the achievement of mutual understanding or agreement rests on the exchange of reasons for or against claims, forming the basis of the coordination of their actions.
In addition to the use of reasons, the reaching of mutual understanding also relies upon people’s lifeworld background. Lifeworld refers to the network of individuals’ lives, covering a cultural reservoir and a shared knowledge base in which we live as members of society (Eriksen and Weigard, 2004). In Habermas’s concept of communicative rationality, the lifeworld is important because it points out the social and cultural conditions that inhibit or facilitate communicative actions in the public sphere. Moreover, it is the social arena where private people come together to communicate and deliberate matters. According to his theory of communicative action, communicative practices are intertwined with aspects and practices of everyday life. The reservoir of taken-for-granted norms, shared knowledge, and everyday routines in the lifeworld lay the basis for mutual understanding and agreement among participants. When people put forward validity claims or arguments about problematized issues, these are always related to pre-conceived interpretations that can find evidence in the everyday lifeworld (Habermas, 1987).

As the theory suggests, it is through non-purposive and nonstrategic interpersonal conversations that communicative action unfolds while reasons are generated. Thus, through communicative action in the spaces of everyday life, people figure out what is in their own interest, what concerns the common good and what political will they have. In addition, the approach of everyday political talk offers us, at the micro-level, a glimpse into the processes of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization, which corresponds to the spheres of culture, society, and personality (Habermas, 1987, pp.138–139).

Habermas (1996) maintains that whoever wants to arrive at shared understanding with his or her listeners via communicative action is required to undertake a set of presuppositions (such as open and equal participation, freedom of speech, and non-coercion) that make communication possible. Drawing upon these pragmatic presuppositions (Habermas, 1984, 1987, 1996), democratic theories about deliberative politics (Cohen, 1989; Benhabib, 1996, Dryzek, 2000; Barber, 1984; Mansbridge 1996; Young 1996, 2002) and especially Graham’s (2008, 2009) theoretical framework for the empirical analysis of online political talk, I will in the following paragraphs delineate the normative requirements of deliberation. They are mainly composed of the three types of normative conditions: the process of discursive exchanges, which focuses on the communicative form and communicative process; the dispositional requirements for achieving mutual understanding; and norms of debate, which focus on discursive equality and freedom.
2.3.1.1 The normative conditions for the process of deliberation

The process of discursive exchanges requires two necessary normative conditions: rationality and argumentative depth. One of the key criteria of deliberation is rationality. Rationality refers to participants’ use of reasoning to justify their claims in discussing matters of common concern, which is the core requirement of the deliberative public sphere. In Habermas’s work, public deliberation is realized by “the standards of ‘reason’” (1989, p.28) and the force of the better argument (1975, p. 108). In Cohen’s (1996) procedure of deliberation, reason giving is, too, viewed as the core aspect of deliberation; he stresses that providing reasons acceptable to others is required to justify one’s claims. This is not only to achieve effective deliberation but also to endorse the equality of all participants involved in the deliberative process. Similarly, Elster (1998) argues that it is through the process of finding flaws in other participants’ arguments, criticizing them, and defending their own arguments that the truth emerges as a set of claims that have been fully debated and understood in the end. As give-and-take of reasons is central to discursive exchanges, a certain degree of argumentative depth is required to arrive at a mutual understanding of a situation. Argumentative depth (Continuity) is important to deliberation: participants are required to engage in continued debate until a mutual understanding is achieved among previously disagreeing participants.

2.3.1.2 The dispositional requirements for achieving mutual understanding

In order to achieve shared understanding among participants, three dispositional conditions are demanded: reciprocity, reflexivity, and sincerity. Reciprocity means mutual social exchange. It requires that participants listen and respond to each other’s questions, arguments, opinions, and statements. In deliberative discussion, people must “always listen to the other side” when others are articulating their claims, reasons, or emotions which implicitly expresses opinions and claims (Tully, 2002, p.218). As argued by Graham and Witschge (2003), reciprocity can be seen as “an indicator of the degree to which participants are actually interacting with each other”, which involves “a giving and taking of perspectives and knowledge” (p.178). The reciprocal listening and responding, in turn, will help participants communicate across different stances and diverse opinions, serving the achievement of mutual understanding rather than the ignorance of difference.

However, it is not enough to achieve mutual understanding by merely listening to others; participants still need to better understand and revise their own positions after considering others’ claims, arguments, or emotions. In other words, participants are
required to meet the dispositional condition of reflexivity\(^1\). Reflexivity refers to the internal process of reflecting upon another’s reasons and preferences against one’s claims and preferences (Graham, 2008, 2009). Specifically, the process of argumentation requires that “participants are willing to question and modify their own positions in the light of all other relevant claims and reasons”. It is necessary that participants “take the position of others” (Dahlberg, 2004, p.8). As Benhabib (1996) points in her idea of deliberative democracy, “When presenting their point of view and position to others, individuals must support them by articulating good reasons in a public context to their co-deliberators” (p.71). Putting oneself in others’ position plays a balancing and bridging role in seeking the common good between advisory opponents (Barber, 1984). To maintain reflexivity in argumentation, participants’ positions or reasons remain open to revision, which prepares for the transformation of private preferences into a common interest in Habermas’s concept of communicative rationality.

The third dispositional requirement is sincerity. Sincerity requires participants to “mean what they say” (Habermas, 2001, p.34). Namely, all information about their identities, desires, intentions, and interests should be truthful. As emphasized by Habermas, the presupposition of rationality will not be achieved unless participants follow the principle of “sincere and unconstrained weighing of the arguments” (p.34). In a similar vein, Dryzek (2000) also points out that deliberation should involve no deception. No deception among participants is important for guaranteeing the equal rights of participants to express different preferences, and it is also necessary to create an environment in which deliberators show mutual respect to each other’s claims and reasons. Therefore, the speakers not only need to be cautious of self-deception but also have to pay attention to whether their arguments are understood or misunderstood by others.

\(2.3.1.3\) Norm of debate

Discursive equality requires that participants respect each other as equals thereby prohibiting abusive and degrading communicative practices. The public process of deliberation is open to all participants who might be affected by its consequences.

\(^1\) Due to the deficiency of using textual analysis to assess participants’ reflexive process, reflexivity is not operationalized in the coding scheme in Chapter 4.
(Habermas, 1996, 2001; Benhabib, 1996; Cohen, 1996; Dryzek, 1990). All citizens affected are equally recognized as capable of participating in deliberation. It requires participants to respect, recognize, and treat each other as equals in the process of deliberation. Specifically, they are regarded as possessing equal deliberative capacity and entitled with equal chance to initiate speech acts and questioning arguments. There should be no rules restricting their participation in deliberation as long as they are proved to be affected by the claims proposed in the debate. The dispositional condition of discursive equality will facilitate the adoption of diverse claims and reasons from different voices, which in turn is a guarantee of an inclusive deliberation. Discursive equality is closely related to social equality outside of discourse in the aspects of education, wealth, skills, and social status. Because it is difficult to insulate the process of discursive exchanges from social-economic inequality of the real world, this thesis merely focuses on whether the value of equality is exploited within the process of deliberation without exploring the tensions between the liberal value of equality and the deliberative concept.

2.3.2 Beyond the framework of deliberation

Compared to deliberative experiments organized by the government, everyday political talk in the sphere of Chinese minjian may get around control from the state. It could create an autonomous space in which citizens are empowered to increase their voice. The networks of everyday talk arise in the social realm of everyday life, in the absence of elite officials as leading actors. The informal sphere of minjian offers lower thresholds of public participation than formal institutions, which may better motivate Chinese mass publics in the political process. Moreover, through the mechanism of everyday talk, new political meanings may emerge from the private sphere into the public sphere.

As Sass and Dryzek (2014) argue, the cultural and social context also plays a role in defining the nature of citizen interaction. Given that the civic culture rooted and sustained in the mundane routines of Chinese citizens shows distinct realities from that of Western societies, modifications to traditional deliberation standards are needed in the Chinese context. To examine the nature of citizen interaction in the informal sphere of Chinese minjian, it is necessary to broaden the theoretical and analytical lenses beyond the formal notion of deliberation. With these concerns in mind, an inclusive and open approach is proposed, which keeps the formal criteria of deliberation but also allows space for other exploratory indicators originating from the specific social-cultural context. This inclusive analytical perspective takes into account the informal characteristics of everyday political talk by embracing other forms of communication, such as humor, storytelling, and so on.
in addition to the conventionally deliberative acts. Meanwhile, it also can include the emotional dimensions of everyday political talk. Using an open-ended analytical framework, this research not only aims to identify the extent to which political talk in the informal public sphere meet the normative deliberative criteria but also to explore how the social traditions and cultural values in local Chinese society may facilitate or prohibit the emergence of a participatory public sphere.