3. Everyday Political Talk in Online China

Over the past two to three decades, decentered communication and interaction in virtual environments has become part of the daily routines of Chinese citizens. In both Chinese and Western scholarship, a great deal has been said about the potential of the internet for creating new forms of publicity and transforming the public sphere. There is an increasing amount of research that has focused on the impact of the internet on politics and society. Especially relevant to this study, some scholars have investigated the emerging online communicative practices in China from the perspective of deliberative democratic theory (Jiang, 2010; Leibold, 2011; Zhou et al., 2008; Lewis, 2013). They interpret it as a means of gauging the internet’s potential in expanding the public sphere. Others have rejected the framework of deliberation, focusing on online activism and other forms of political participation and civic engagement (Yang, 2009; Herold and Marolt, 2011; Wu, 2011; Pan, 2014; Xing, 2012).

This chapter reviews and summarizes previous research on the Chinese internet and its impact on politics and society in order to analyze whether and to what extent the use of the internet has expanded the public sphere. Due to the complexity and plurality of the Chinese internet in relation to the hierarchical power structures in China, the aim of this literature review is not merely to see whether Chinese citizens’ online communicative practices meet deliberative ideals and constitute a public sphere. Rather, I argue that Chinese cyberspace is a new empirical context which requires the researcher to move beyond the traditional research agenda of online deliberation and research how deliberative expectations relates to the Chinese situation. Whether the broad use of the internet creates peril or promise for the public sphere in China is addressed in Section 3.1. Section 3.2 reviews how the Chinese internet enables and supports other modes of political participation, beyond the framework of deliberation. Section 3.3 reflects upon the impact of the internet on authoritarian governance in China from a state-centered perspective. Critiquing the dichotomous approach (control versus resistance, state versus society, authoritarianism versus democracy), which is often applied in current research on the Chinese internet, Section 3.4 moves the ball forward by suggesting a new research agenda. I propose to look at other forms of power struggles and other ways of being political in the everyday life context. Then, Section 3.5 discusses the Chinese internet’s potential as a bridging sphere between the private and the public, which may offer a new social milieu for political participation in China. Based on this, I argue that by doing a comprehensive analysis of everyday political talk on the internet, researchers can explore how ordinary
citizens practice their political subjectivity in the context of everyday life. At the same time, I point to the lack of empirical research about citizens’ communication in everyday online spaces in China and show how this study fills the gap in current scholarship. Finally, Section 3.6 ends the chapter with reflections on the uniqueness of Chinese cyberspace and the significance of studying everyday online political talk in China.

3.1 Chinese internet and the deliberative public sphere

With the rapid growth of the internet, many aspects of Chinese people’ everyday life have changed. The medium has been adopted by an increasing number of people, providing them with a wide variety of online platforms and bringing them low cost and convenient access to information. Witnessing these vast technological changes, scholars have long been debating whether the broad penetration of the internet in China creates opportunities for the growth of the public sphere. This results in three strands of thinking. The first strand views internet developments from the perspective of deliberative democracy. The second trend studies the Chinese internet from the angle of civic activism (discussed in Section 3.2), and the third strand approaches it by considering the Chinese internet as a tool of authoritarian governance (discussed in Section 3.3).

Taking a perspective of deliberative democracy, scholars see the internet enables the emergence of a nascent online public sphere, but meanwhile, they encounter a skeptical challenge. Some scholars suggest that the wide use of the internet might result in a booming deliberative public sphere in China. They argue that the internet has extended citizens’ access to information, facilitated users to produce pluralist framing of issues, and created space for open debates. As a result, it has contributed to the diversification of discourses in public debate (Zheng and Wu, 2005; Tai, 2006; Yang, 2003; Yang, 2009; Jiang, 2010; Rosen, 2010; Lewis, 2013). Examining the societal impact of ICTs, scholars argue that the internet has decreased the centralized control of information by the state (Rosen, 2010) and democratized the “communication of information in Chinese society” (Tai, 2006, p. 289). Although Chinese citizens are not fully entitled to freedom of speech as envisioned in the Habermasian ideal public sphere, it has still triggered an “information revolution” when compared to the closed traditional media system (Lewis, 2013, p.12).

In addition to the internet’s role in promoting the free flow of information, scholars see its potential for motivating citizens to engage in rational deliberation, i.e., the production of public discourse about issues of common concern. As there is a lack of formal access to politics in China, the internet offers citizens important spaces to express their
personal opinions and channel them to the broader citizenry (Yang, 2003). It is considered an important venue for open debates about societal issues (Rauchfleisch and Schäfer, 2015), which is the core requirement of public deliberation. Through the public opinion formed online, citizens are enabled to criticize government policies in a collective way (Zheng and Wu, 2005). For instance, Zhou’s (2009) study on citizens’ discussion about the dismissal of a corrupt official in Shanghai on the blog site of NetEase (a popular news portal in China) found that NetEase bloggers created a discourse of their own by posting original messages rather than merely reproducing and discussing published news from mainstream media. Moreover, bloggers expressed a very diverse set of opinions related to sensitive political disputes and power struggles within the party. This case study demonstrates that netizens are voicing their personal views and expressing criticisms towards political power in public affairs, which are essential for the growth of a deliberative public sphere and the development of robust civil society in China.

As revealed by Jiang (2010), public deliberation about issues of common concern is, to a certain extent, allowed on the internet by the central government in order to pacify social conflicts and improve authoritarian governance. It is worth noting that the emergence of these deliberative practices is not merely determined by technological progress but are co-evolving with Chinese citizens’ awareness of civic rights promoted in civil society and their will to participate in politics. The internet started to evolve in the mid-1990s, the time when civil society was already growing in China. Yang (2003) believes the emergence of civil society has also encouraged citizens to use the internet for public ends because the existing civic networks among social associations already laid an interactive and social basis for the use of the internet. Also, people’s demand for freedom of political expression has grown as they obtained more and more freedom of engagement in economic and cultural fields; their increasing integration in a participatory culture has been translated into their civic, political engagement online (Jiang, 2010).

Rather than endorsing a virtual online public sphere as defined by Habermas, ‘skeptics’ have paid attention to the political inactiveness of Chinese netizens, group polarization, the uncivil nature of online discourse, and censorship and control by the government. Some argue that Chinese citizens are not going online to pursue political or social change (Leibold, 2011; Damm, 2007). Damm (2007) claims that the Chinese internet users’ preference to consumerism, leisure, and lifestyle issues has rendered their online practices apolitical. While they avoid involvement in subversive politics, they gather online with people who share their narrow interest and identify with them and create
isolated niches online, leading to the fragmentation of Chinese society. Moreover, in Leibold (2011)’s study of the Chinese blogosphere, he argues most Chinese netizens are using the internet for shallow infotainment, misinformation, and interest-based isolated communities rather than communicating between different groups.

The like-minded deliberations are also common when netizens discuss politics online. Zhou et al.’s (2008) content analysis of the deliberativeness of online discussions on a Chinese newspaper website found that participants more often show agreement with like-minded people than interacting with people holding opposing views. Based on his study of the Chinese blogosphere, Leibold (2011) too warns that online discussions in Chinese cyberspace often lead to extremist views and turn into enclaves of lined-minded individuals in the absence of interactive exchanges across differences. This prohibits the achievement of shared understandings. Medaglia and Yang (2017) find a similar trend. According to them, in Chinese online discussion communities, public deliberation increasingly unfolds among people sharing similar views. It only occurs among different-minded participants when their opinions are not apparently conflicting.

Uncivility also disrupts the growth of deliberative culture in Chinese cyberspace. Anonymous internet users are often involved in flaming, personal attacks, degrading and other uncivil discourses, undermining the ideal of mutual respect and civility in deliberation (Leibold, 2011). Han (2018) shows that the uncivil denigration and stigmatization of Gongzhi (public intellectuals) happening online undermines the voice of intellectuals in public debates, consequently curbing the growth of civil society in China. Additionally, the censorship policy and other means of manipulation implemented on Chinese internet by the government such as the computer filtering system (Kalathil and Boas, 2003) and the hired opinion manipulated (Morozov, 2011), also impede the public and deliberative prospects of citizens’ use of new media.

Based on the above research, the Chinese internet has indeed opened up deliberative possibilities such as a broader availability of diverse sources of information, pluralized discourse about controversial issues, and rational-critical discussions that are open to ordinary citizens. However, there is no sufficient evidence that Habermas’ ideal of solving societal problems through the power of deliberative communication or by the public use of reason is coming to life in Chinese cyberspace. The empirical evidence presents certain spaces for citizen deliberation about public affairs are opened up, while the development of deliberative democracy on Chinese internet still faces many obstacles. Scholars therefore often describe the current Chinese virtual space as an incipient
deliberative public sphere (Zhou et al., 2008; Lewis, 2013) because of the lack of reciprocal deliberative exchanges that happen in online spaces and the constraints caused by the censorship policy.

What’s more, the nascent public sphere has been proven to privilege the discourse of elite and exclude subalterns. As Lewis (2013) states, “this truly deliberative public sphere remains largely confined to motivated citizens and elite circles” (p.20). Zhao (2008, p.262-280) also argues that the Chinese online sphere is of an exclusionary and pro-capitalist nature. She compared two events that were covered by the influential urban Newspaper Nanfang Metropolitan News (NMN), which also became hot topics in online discussions. One story concerns Zhigang Sun, an urban college graduate who was detained and cruelly beaten to death by the police in a custody and repatriation center, which was established to deal with urban vagrants because he did not have a temporary resident permit. In NMN’s report and internet discourses, Sun’s story was discussed as a case of violation of human rights. This tragedy motivated urban citizens and liberal intellectuals to engage in a popular crusade for civil rights and individual freedom against the abusive administrative power of the state. By describing Sun as an ‘urban citizen’ whose civil rights were violated, the case gained popular support in civic-minded online discussions.

The other story involves the death of Binyu Wang, a rural migrant worker. He was sentenced to death after he killed four people at his boss’s home in a conflict over wage debts and other sufferings caused by inequality and the lack of social security. Wang’s experiences were very typical of millions of other migrant workers. Afterward, sympathetic opinions arose from internet communities, questioning legal justice and the legitimacy of the death penalty. However, these were later challenged and suppressed by civic-minded internet discourses and media reports that supported the rule of law and criminal justice. Zhao’s analysis indicates that the virtual public sphere in China selectively articulates the wills and demands of urban middle- and upper-class and liberal-minded professionals such as public intellectuals and journalists. Both the online and offline public sphere exclude lower urban class workers and poor peasants whose discourses do not necessarily align with the rational discourses of elites. Similar to Zhao’s (2008) argument about the emergent ‘Chinese bourgeois public sphere’ as part of China’s modernization, Xing (2012, p.68) also finds evidence of “its exclusionary, class-biased nature in its outcry for constitutional governance, civil rights, and legal system by neglecting and even suppressing the subaltern publics’ interests”.

Everyday Political Talk in Online China
3.2 The Chinese internet and civic activism

Although the growth of the Chinese internet has not brought a robust deliberative public sphere, it has played a significant role in the rise of civic and participatory culture. Even though the online discursive practices of Chinese citizens are not all deliberative, they are not necessarily without participatory and civic meaning. Sometimes, non-deliberative discursive practices carry particular civic values in the Chinese social, cultural, and political context. Yang (2009, p. 2) suggests that with the widespread use of the internet a “participatory and contentious” Chinese cyberculture has emerged, even under the government’s political control. He describes that various creative forms of online activism (symbols, imagery, rhetoric, and sounds) have developed, through which netizens are empowered to express complaints, discuss injustices, and mock political power. This contentious online activism stimulated the growth of unofficial democracy in Chinese society, Yang argues.

Scholars argue that online activism, in particular, has the potential to support affective engagement (Papacharissi, 2015). For example, Pan (2014) reveals in a study of emotional expressions in Weibo discussions related to air pollution in Beijing, how emotionality frames citizens’ online discussions. He finds that Chinese netizens severely blame the authorities for their ineffective air pollution control and criticize the media’s selective reportage of the air pollution situation. The strong negative emotions they display, foster a critical discourse towards the government. According to Pan, the emotional criticism of Weibo users is not very likely to develop into rational-critical debate. Rather, netizens’ complaints about the government are shaped and intensified by their emotions of anger and sadness. Angry citizens tend to target specific officials or government agencies to pressure them to respond to their concerns. Sad comments, on the other hand, often lead to critical reflection on the social-economic causes of the pollution, such as China’s model of economic development. These commenters put less blame on the authorities, and voice their critique indirectly. In this case, these emotional expressions in online activism work as an alternative venue for public engagement in China. They contribute to the emergence of a Weibo sphere that bears participatory potentials that differ from Habermas’s ideals of the public sphere. Other studies add to that by pointing out how emotions are used in the making of agonistic publics (Tong, 2015) and building group identity (Song, et al., 2016), how aesthetic experiences function as triggers of political discussions (Wu, 2011), and how online carnivals are a forceful way to counter power hegemony (Herold and Marolt, 2011).
Online activism can facilitate the formation of counter publics. Sun (2012), for example, shows how migrant workers from rural China become cultural activists with the assistance of digital media. She finds that the widespread use of digital media technologies among China’s rural migrant workers has enabled migrant workers to narrate and document their lives and labor experiences. Their creative use of digital video and social media opens up new spaces for them to represent themselves and participate in debates about social inequality in the public arena. Through these subaltern discourses, they thus construct an alternative working class culture. Similarly, Xing (2012) illustrates how workers’ internet use and their communicative practices in online communities open up possibilities to constitute an autonomous space to safeguard workers’ rights and interests. He argues that, with the accessibility of digital technologies, worker activists have initiated alternative counter-publics. These grassroots internet communities serve Chinese workers, encourage solidarity among co-workers and raise their class-consciousness. They organize reading and learning activities related to rights protection and labor laws, invite scholars to help workers understand the socialist system and the political environment while they also establish forums for workers to discuss their life and working conditions. Xing argues that these internet communities and workers’ online activism build the foundation for the emergence of a counter-bourgeois public sphere which speaks for the working-class.

With many examples of online civic activism, how do we understand them in relation to the public sphere? Differing from the conventional political-process of organized collective protest or social movement, Yang (2009) directs readers to understand civic activism in online China more from the cultural dimensions such as symbols, imagery, rhetoric, and sounds of activism. As the government often suppresses organized political actions and social protests, Chinese citizens often move to the allowed space on the internet to engage in cultural contentions, creatively negotiating with political power. All these civic activities that are practiced on the Chinese internet do not necessarily directly encourage citizens to engage in public deliberation and do not directly speak to a deliberative culture in the Chinese online sphere. Dahlgren (2006) points out, understanding the public sphere merely from the framework of deliberative ideals narrows our visions of citizen interaction. He turns to the cultural origins of the public sphere, what he calls “civic culture” (Dahlgren, 2002, p. 19) to understand citizens’ communicative interactions in the social-cultural world. Drawing upon Dahlgren’s (2006) idea of civic culture, I argue the various minimal forms of civic activism on Chinese internet accumulate into civic culture among citizens, constituting the social-civic preconditions of deliberation.
and participation in China. Bearing in mind the dimensions of online activism is important for the construction of a model of an online public sphere that is more integrated with the Chinese social-civic culture.

### 3.3 The Chinese internet as a tool of authoritarian governance

The above review of research about the Chinese internet has demonstrated the political implications it may have for society both from the perspective of deliberative democracy and civic activism. According to these previous studies, it is difficult to ignore the empowering effect of the internet on Chinese society. However, there is a third group of scholars who are more skeptical about the transformative power of internet use under the authoritarian rule of Chinese party-sate. They view it as a tool for authoritarian governance by the state. As the development of the internet is linked with China’s liberal modernization program, the government has been adopting strategies such as e-government programs to enhance its governance capacity. As in 2006, the former Prime Minister Wen Jiabao urged the government to be open up to online criticisms and listen to online public opinions (Zheng, 2008). However, this online strategy does not imply any relaxation of the political control over internet use.

First, the new opportunities for citizens to participate in public debate and civic engagement are restricted under the pervasive surveillance and censorship from the government. Facing the challenges brought about by the digital world, the Chinese government has developed very sophisticated censorship systems to maintain a stable and harmonious society. The censorship strategies include applying automated computer filtering to censor sensitive topics, encouraging self-censorship by making regulations, and harshly cracking down on dissidents (Kalathil and Boas, 2003). In 2012, the government started to recentralize their control of the internet. In the Eighteenth Party Congress, Chinese authorities have stated that “we should strengthen social management of the internet and promote orderly network operations in accordance with laws and regulations” (Xinhua, 2012). In recent years, the government has made “The Great Firewall of China” to block information flow between Chinese citizens and foreign netizens from outside of China and built massive social media censorship organizations to selectively suppress online posts (King et al., 2013, 2014). To deal with the changing internet ecology, the government has also updated their propaganda strategies beyond censorship. Tactics which can be applied to shape online opinion in favor of the government are put in place, like hiring online commentators, the so-called ‘water army’ or ‘fifty-cent army’, to intervene in public discussions (Morozov, 2011; King et al., 2013). The 50c army represents
a new type of human censorship. They are hired by internet firms to post messages to distract public discussions and change the discussed topic by praising the party, the state, and the nation for the great achievements they made.

New controlling policies have also been introduced to suppress new forms of digital activism, such as real-name registration, (Jiang, 2016) which is voluntary at the front-stage where users can use a pseudonym, but mandatory at the backstage where users need to provide their real name, which is bounded with ID info. This enables the government to easily find out which piece of information is posted by whom and get his or her personal information. Compared to the closed authoritarian period, individual netizens may feel that they gained more freedom of speech. However, they are still monitored and censored to the extent that any information or activities that threaten the stability of the state are not allowed on the internet. The findings of an empirical study done by King et al. (2013) echo this characteristic of the Chinese internet very well. It reveals that the expression of general social criticism is tolerated, but activities that mobilize collective action are oppressed by the government.

Second, with new forms of political engagement emerging online, the authorities are simultaneously learning how to adapt policy-making to online public discourses to improve the state’s governance capability, thus maintaining the legitimacy of the regime. For example, local officials are pushed to interact online with netizens by establishing a range of e-government programs. Schlæger and Jiang’s (2014) study finds that microblogging by officials and institutions functions as a “reinforcer of the existing power arrangement to produce politics of usual” (p.203). This enhances the regime’s resilience in the short run, rather than bringing political or organizational change. Similarly, Esarey (2015) argues that governmental micro-bloggers’ interactions with netizens may help the government to maintain the ‘political status quo’, but that their effectiveness is limited if official bloggers do not really engage with critical citizens. To some extent, theses e-government strategies have contributed to the government’s legitimacy, but only with limited effects. Moreover, the Chinese government has been applying opinion mining to monitor debate on Weibo. It uses it to turn public opinion formed on Weibo into a feedback mechanism for its policymaking or to identify potential social unrest. Nevertheless, these feedback and accountability mechanisms are still contingent upon authorities’ will to respond to online opinions or to ignore or suppress them (Sullivan, 2014).

However, no matter if they are effective or not, with all these measures, the government tries to push Chinese officials to respond to public opinion. This has its
limitations though, as Sullivan (2014) warns because the government is governing online public communication to meet its own ends. It does not aim to empower the larger citizenry. Moreover, while there are signs of local governments’ responses to the concerns of citizens, the internet is used by governments to control, surveil, and manipulate public expressions (Han and Jia, 2018). The coevolution of the internet and state adaptation is, therefore, characterized as “networked authoritarianism” (Mackinnon, 2011, p.33).

3.4 Advancing a new agenda

So far, relevant literature on the political effects of the internet has been reviewed to show the dynamics of internet, politics, and society in China. Although these studies have provided us with valuable insights that foster our understanding of online practices, much of the research is framed in terms of the analytical dichotomy of control and resistance between state and society. Research mainly focuses on the online practices from the macro-perspective of state-society dynamics while ignoring less subversive communicative practices in the everyday sphere. Practices that do not have a political goal or do not necessarily involve the state but do contribute to the development of citizens’ subjectivity and civic agency. As Armstrong and Bernstein (2008) reveal, social actors mainly target state institutions in their resistance, if they regard the state as the single source of hegemonic dominance.

By critiquing these narrow dichotomous perspectives to analyze mediated political communication, Yuan (2015) argues it is important to look at the emerging communicative practices in Chinese cyberspace that challenge non-state forms of power in the fragmented Chinese society such as gender suppression and marriage discrimination in the socio-cultural realm. At the same time, she argues that researchers need to recognize the complicated role of the state in Chinese cyberspace rather than ignoring the influence of the state. It is important to see the state’s active involvement in many aspects of Chinese political life, such as the development of civil society, not to constrain our understanding of the state in the dichotomous logic. The state has been the project manager of the modernization process in China, initiating top-down political reforms on the one hand, such as the development of civil society in China. Civil society’s taking root in Chinese society relies on the inspiration of civic awareness and the creation of a modern citizenry by the state among the people. In this sense, the Chinese government encourages the general public to express political views and to participate in politics via the internet. On the other hand, the relationship between the state and civil society is complicated as they both cooperate and compete for communicative power and opportunities for engagement.
that emerge in the Chinese online public sphere (Chen and Reese, 2015). For instance, the state sometimes suppresses and sometimes supports political activism. Accordingly, citizens sometimes target and resist the state while they, in other instances, align with it. Moreover, the state’s controlling policies are not implemented monolithically. Wright (2014) shows that the internet filtering system varies across different regions of China in terms of the specific implementation of censorship policies such as their target, application, and effect. In light of the complex and multiple roles the state is playing in Chinese cyberspace, Yuan (2015) suggests to understand mediated activism as being in a flexible relation with the state, as a constitutive power in both the establishment and reproduction of the social order in Chinese society, moving beyond the simplistic opposition between control and resistance.

The binary approach mainly constrains its focus to the power relations embodied in the state and the political institutions. However, it does not pay sufficient attention to the complex and plural nature of the Chinese internet, which generates other forms of power struggles and alternative ways of being political. As Han (2015a, 2015b) argues, various social actors can influence the process of public opinion formation in Chinese cyberspace. For instance, the so-called ‘voluntary fifty-cent army’ consisted of ordinary citizens (Han, 2015b) are not paid by the state but sustain a pro-regime discourse voluntarily. By doing so, they are a very influential force in the process of public deliberation. They are not intentionally supportive of state propaganda; they are very likely to hold critical opinions towards the government on a wide spectrum of societal issues, but they are firm defenders of the regime. Acknowledging the heterogeneous nature of the Chinese internet, Jiang (2016) also calls for a more sophisticated framework that pays attention to both the plurality of actors who may influence “the internet as a civic space” (Dahlgren, 2015) and the power relations at the micro-level. In sync with this, Yang (2014) proposes the analytical framework of “deep Internet studies”. Such an approach should focus on the emergence of new forms of political engagement in citizens’ mundane digital practices at the micro-level and their linkage to institutional politics. Based on these theoretical insights, this study attempts to move beyond the macro dichotomy of state and society to deepen our current understanding of online political participation in China. It challenges the binaries and boundaries of controlling policies and political expression, the non-political and the political, the private and the public in the broader context of digitally mediatized everyday life.
3.5 Chinese internet as a hybrid sphere and everyday political talk

In recent years, Western scholars have been worried about the disappearance of political engagement and the decline of social capital in democratic societies (Putnam, 1995; Skocpol, 2003). They believe that the use of communication technologies has caused the shrinking of traditional offline group memberships and social ties, and, as a result, is contributing to the demise of civic culture. These worries have provoked debates and reflections on how to define ‘civic’ and the ‘political’. Taking the context of the socio-political transformation underpinned by the economic situation into account, scholars have re-analyzed the political implications of the uncivil and the non-political. They found that civic ideals were not dead; rather they were embodied in the rise of “lifestyle politics” (Bennett, 1998) and the mundane ad-hoc actions which are more individualistic and privatistic (Schudson, 2006). Coleman (2007) asserts there are “potential spaces of democracy” beyond the formally political in the setting of everyday life where ordinary individuals actively negotiate with power in more personal ways. More specifically, the personal becomes political when it draws the attention of the wider public to discuss issues. This process of politicization pays attention to the established structure of power but without necessarily involving the state (Mansbridge, 1999). As these scholars suggest, political engagement and public discourses are not in decline, but they reside into the bridging sphere between the public and the private.

Nowadays, the internet has become a preferred medium of everyday communication, creating online spaces for consumption, entertainment, and other social activities. Online networks are increasingly embedded within the mundane spaces of everyday life, showing their potential for opening up new social spaces. These everyday social spaces are not only places where people can gather, meet, and interact together; their emergence is also important for people’s public life. Papacharissi (2010) describes this social realm as “an alternative to the bipolar continuum of public and private”. It provides a fluid place where the boundaries of the private and the public are constantly blurred, bridged, and renegotiated. In these social spaces of everyday life, beyond the formally political, political practices also occur. For instance, discussions about public affairs are very likely to take place in personal conversations at home or at work (Wyatt, Katz and Kim, 2000). With the rise of the internet, personal activity can also become political, for example, when people are reading and commenting on political news on their personal blogs and web-pages. In the internet-era, the blurring boundaries between the private and
the public, and between the personal and the political, have been reinforced in the cyber-social environment.

The internet has intensified the blurring of the distinction between public and private because of the new types of socialization and new forms of communication it enables. Highfield (2016), in his book *Social Media and Everyday Politics*, provides many examples to show how personal practices in citizens’ everyday life become political in the age of the internet. He describes how sharing image memes, hashtags, replying, forwarding, and retweeting and other mundane Twitter behaviors are intersected with politics. For example, mothers posting photos of breastfeeding, which then becomes a public issue because it attracts public attention and stimulates discussions about whether mothers are allowed to feed their babies in public. Papacharissi (2015) also addresses how the personal is political in the online sphere in her study about trending Twitter conversations. This research reveals that performative gestures – play and affect – afforded via social media provide users with chances to both reproduce and reverse social norms.

Both Highfield and Papacharissi’s work offers us a picture of how individuals can consciously or unconsciously use the internet to link the private with the public, the personal with the political. Papacharissi (2010) argues that citizens can be more autonomous and empowered when they negotiate their relationship with the existing power structures via their everyday networks situated in the private sphere. Along with the growth of the internet, online media have become the fabric of the new political society where new forms of public forces might emerge in the negotiation of the private and the public. Papacharissi (2010) thinks that the networked structure of online technologies, together with the hybrid spaces that both are private and public they shape, create “a new civic vernacular” for individual citizens to practice their citizenship flexibly and fluidly. In light of new forms of being political embodied in citizens’ online practices, Dahlgren (2015) also sees the internet as a “solo sphere” for “internet-based political participation” and “a new social milieu for political agency” (p.28). In other words, the internet constitutes a historically new social realm for the emergence of civic agency.

Based on the research about new opportunities for civic engagement the internet may bring, or not, I suggest that net-based everyday spaces may be of more significance in China. Unlike in Western countries where public participation tends to be institutionalized in civic organizations, political participation for grassroots publics in China is unorganized and un-institutionalized. Because of the lack of formal channels for political participation
and the exclusionary nature of the existing public sphere in China, informal networks are considered important alternative structures through which political engagement can occur. In this situation, the most significant public value of the Chinese internet is that it allows for an alternative entry for the unorganized ordinary citizens, i.e., the majority of the Chinese population, to get together, socialize, and reflect upon their everyday life realities in relation to existing power relations. In these everyday online spaces, which developed with the widening of internet use, new forms of participation might emerge from citizens’ online practices. Afforded by the internet’s ability to disseminate information and connect to others, these new forms of political engagement and political views could be transmitted to the wider public and fuel into the broader political process.

Along with the networked communication afforded by the Chinese internet, new forms of political socialization emerge among individuals who often participate in public matters with the self as a point of reference. Specifically, citizens’ way of being political online is increasingly embedded within their self-related life experiences or concerns. As Rosen (2010) argues, the political often gets personal when Chinese people join a forum where politics is discussed. Nowadays, Chinese youth often take part in politics through private channels such as chats with friends and family, and anonymous online activities. Moreover, Chinese people are more and more inclined to be involved politically via lifestyle issues. Taking backpacking communities consisting of like-minded people in a web-based travel club as an example, Zhang (2014) shows that citizens have developed a new form of online activism. The aim is not to confront or protest against state power, nor is it to provoke radical political change. Instead, they did not employ conventional activist strategies and tactics but brought up the social injustices and made efforts to solve concrete social problems by providing peer help and support. Moreover, they are involved in charity donations both online and offline.

Zhang (2014) points out that an increasing number of Chinese youth are joining urban online communities, such as this travel club, and that their ideas change under the influence of the “relationships and practices they are engaged in on the internet” (p. 291). Alongside the rise of an urban lifestyle, consumer culture is emerging in contemporary Chinese society. Internet usage among ordinary consumers has led to “a nonpolitical kind of ‘cultural’ and ‘do-it-yourself’ citizenship that indicates adherence to identity politics” (Damm, 2007, p.286). For example, on BBS forums, there are often sub-forums focusing on topics such as culture and art, films and TV series, women, fashion, makeup, cars, real-estate, finance, and so on. These topics are all about lifestyle and private life, which reflects
the preferences of urban middle-class consumers. These sub-forums are more a playground for leisure and entertainment than hotbeds of political activities that are geared towards social change. Although these commercial and lifestyle spaces do fragmentize Chinese society, they also provide Chinese citizens with the opportunities to gather and discuss issues beyond political spaces that are heavily controlled by the state.

However, the civic culture rooted in lifestyle issues and consumption-based sociality on the internet has mainly contributed to the formation of middle-class consciousness and the practice of middle-class subjectivity. Yuan (2015) has revealed that Chinese internet’s making of ‘middle-stratum’ is accompanied by the various forms of online political expression and activism that are mostly tackling middle-class anxieties about social mobility. She claims that “the making of a new middle-class as a group with a distinct identity and consciousness is dialectically intertwined with the rise of collective sociopolitical actions on the Chinese Internet” (Yuan, 2015, p.222). In recent years, the internet has also been rapidly integrated into the life of people with lower social and economic standing. This demographic change in internet users suggest new patterns of political practices may soon emerge online. Studying online political talk can be revealing in that, as a low threshold form of political practice, it opens up opportunities for citizens from all walks of life to engage in politics. Through a nuanced analysis of political talk in the internet-based everyday sphere, we can see how ordinary Chinese citizens, including middle-class and also the underclass, develop and practice their civic subjectivity through mundane conversations of everyday life issues rooted in lived experiences. At the same time, it enables a better understanding of the conditions for ordinary citizens to engage in the public sphere. In doing so, research can explore whether citizen interactions on the Chinese internet promote grassroots democracy among the wider citizenry rather than cater to the specific claims of the middle-class.

Empirical research on the internet’s potential to open up space for citizens to engage in politics has been growing in the last two decades in Western countries. Scholars have studied political discussions in a variety of online environments to explore whether the internet expands the public sphere. Early research has examined the deliberative quality of political conversations on various types of online forums, including online deliberative initiatives (Dahlberg, 2001), online forums associated with civil society organizations (Gimmler, 2001), partisan online group discussion forums (Davis, 1999) and Usenet political forums (Wilhelm, 2000). However, this does not represent the entire picture of
citizens’ online political discussions, as they ignore informal political talk in spaces that are not explicitly political.

More recently, empirical studies have moved beyond ‘political spaces’ to broader civic discourses in spaces that are not obviously political. For instance, Graham (2010) looked at a reality TV discussion forums, exploring how politics mixes with popular culture. In his examination of everyday online political talk, he not only assesses the deliberativeness of such talk, but also examines the role of expressives in those day-to-day political discussions. In another study, Graham and Hajru (2011) found that citizens’ casual talk on reality TV fan forums can trigger the politicization of ordinary matters in people’s everyday lives. Another notable finding was that such forums have the potential to support and facilitate communicative practices that are oriented towards mutual understanding rather than to strategic communication, i.e., debating to win. In another empirical study, Graham (2012) found that the nature of everyday political talk in a non-political forum dedicated to family and parenting issues was quite deliberative and achieved a high level of convergence (mutual understanding). Other studies have also found that everyday political talk in ‘online third spaces’ (i.e., non-political communicative spaces beyond the home and workplace) can lead to political actions when the culture of online spaces is oriented towards creating a friendly, helping and supportive environment (Graham, Jackson, and Wright, 2015, 2016).

In a Western context, citizen interactions have been researched in a wide range of genres of the net-based public sphere. Although a certain amount of research has been conducted about online political discussions in China, there are still gaps in the research on online political talk in terms of the diversity of online platforms and online contexts. Especially, studies of political talk in communicative spaces, which are not explicitly political, are missing in scholarship on China. The most systematic study of public discussions in Chinese cyberspace is Jiang’s (2010) work on authoritarian online deliberation. She distinguishes between four types of online spaces where Chinese citizens can practice political deliberation about public issues, depending upon the varying extent in which the state controls these communicative spaces. They range from the center to the periphery of authoritarian rule: central propaganda spaces, government-regulated commercial spaces, emergent civic spaces, and international deliberative spaces. Her analysis of deliberative practices in these online spaces breaks with the unitary vision of the Chinese internet as a homogeneous entity by demonstrating the dialectics of state control and deliberation. However, Jiang’s model of authoritarian online deliberation still
confines the focus on political communication within the online spaces of conventional politics. It fails to expand the scope of research to online spaces which are not explicitly political – the real periphery of the political spectrum.

3.6 Conclusion: everyday political talk on the complex Chinese internet

With the fast development of digital technologies, scholars have started to explore the potentials of the internet for expanding the public sphere in China. Some approach this theme via the lenses of deliberative democracy and public sphere theory. According to the literature review in Section 3.1, online deliberation research shows that the internet has promoted the emergence of a deliberative public sphere in China. However, it is still in its infancies due to limited spaces of deliberation and the obstacles that hinder deliberative communication. Others reject the framework of deliberation and argue that the power of the internet lies in its role in enhancing a participatory and activist culture in China (Section 3.2). Another research strand attempts to explore the Chinese internet’s effect on authoritarian rule, concluding that the state uses the internet as a governance tool instead of posing a major challenge to the regime, as parts of Western scholarship expects (Section 3.3).

Based on the literature review conducted in this chapter, I argue that Chinese cyberspace is a complex entity with diverging features coexisting together. It does show deliberative potential, but it also supports activism and other forms of political engagement. At the same time, the state is playing a dominant role in the management of the internet in China, applying both controlling strategies and adaptation policies. Given the complexity of the context, I argue that this dichotomous approach is not sufficient because it overlooks the communicative practices that do not necessarily involve the state but relate to power relations at the micro-level. Therefore, moving forward with a new agenda, this dissertation looks at citizens’ mundane online communicative practices in the net-based everyday sphere, with a focus on citizen deliberation and social-civic practices at the micro-level in the everyday life context.

I argue that the approach of everyday political talk offers researchers a more inclusive lens to understand citizen interactions in the Chinese online public sphere. First, it creates chances to explore the possible dynamics of deliberation and social-civic process in an everyday life context. The current literature related to online deliberation offers only limited empirical evidence to unveil the dialectical dynamics between deliberative discussions and social-civic communications. How does the social-civic process interact
with the process of deliberative exchanges on the internet? The question of whether the social-civic elements rooted in citizens’ affective-esthetic experiences in the Chinese online public sphere promote deliberative discussions, remains to be researched. As discussed in Chapter 2, everyday political talk is non-purposive. It doesn’t have a deliberative nor a civic goal. When deliberation and other social-civic activities emerge in the course of the online political talk, their boundaries are blurred, and the clear division disappears. Bringing the two dimensions into relation with each other is not to suggest that one is more advantageous over the other. Both of them play an important role in the political society. This dialectical perspective can help researchers to be aware of the complex nature of Chinese cyberspace and recognize the need to understand the process of public deliberation with reference to the civic culture. With the resistance and control dynamics at the macro-level, Chinese internet is an interesting case to see whether the online social-civic practices in the context of everyday life can be incorporated into a culture of deliberation in the current Chinese online public sphere.

Moving beyond the traditional framework of deliberation, the crucial move here is the micro investigation of informal citizen deliberation and political engagement in the digitally mediated spaces of everyday life. Compared to rational deliberation, unstructured everyday political talk is more open to the emergence of counter-publics and communication of difference in discursive practices. Also, everyday political talk also offers citizens opportunities to practice citizenship and enhance their civic subjectivities within a relatively ‘safe’ context. This might foster the growth of civic culture (Dahlgren, 2002). In this study, therefore, I explore how the public space is intertwined with and contextualized in the everyday lifeworld of ordinary individuals, how political deliberations emerge from everyday talk, and how individualistic, private, and social activities that originate from the everyday lifeworld of unorganized ordinary Chinese citizens accumulate into civic agency. What’s most important, online political talk as a part of civic culture provides researchers with a new empirical context to think about the dialectical relation between public deliberation and civic activism and other forms of political engagement, which could produce a more comprehensive understanding of the net-based everyday sphere as a whole. Investigating everyday political talk in Chinese digital spaces puts forward the particular Chinese socio-cultural context, which may contribute to enriching online deliberation research. Moreover, it provides possibilities to incorporate new aspects of reality into the operationalization and thematization of public deliberation theory.