Engaging in politics
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5. Environmental talk in the Chinese Green Public Sphere

A Comparative Analysis of Daily Green Speak Across Three Chinese Online Forums

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores empirically how Chinese citizens engage in environmental politics in online discussion forums. Most of the current scholarship about the Chinese green public sphere focuses on specific environmental events/movements with NGOs (ENGOs) as the central public, while everyday talk about environmental issues by everyday citizens (i.e., the general public) is underexplored in the context of China. Therefore, this study investigates online environmental talk by ordinary Chinese citizens, outside elite circles, in what has been labeled as the “green public sphere” (Yang & Calhoun, 2007, p. 212). By means of a comparative case study, Chinese citizens’ everyday talk about environmental issues on three distinct online forums are analyzed, attempting to understand how different forums (from explicitly political to non-political ones) influence citizens’ daily online green-speak (i.e., everyday discussions on the environment), and the opportunities they afford (new forms of) civic engagement.

The public sphere is a discursive space where private people gather together to debate issues of public concern, and public opinion is formed (Habermas, 1989). In response to the Habermasian concept of the public sphere, which grew with the rise of modernity in European countries, it is argued that a public sphere has never been fostered in Chinese history (Brown, 2014). However, this does not mean that the concept of the public sphere is not important for Chinese society. In the Chinese context, the public sphere is similarly, but more broadly, conceptualized as “a space for public discourse and communication” (Yang & Calhoun, 2007, p. 4), which could be critically assessed based on

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Habermas’s normative ideals to empirically capture and reflect the changing aspects of state-society relations and politics in transitional China. In the environmental arena, together with the burgeoning environmental movement, a “green public sphere” has emerged (Yang & Calhoun, 2007, p. 2). This refers to space where different publics gather to articulate environmental issues, produce and consume green discourses, and rely on media for dissemination.

Environmental movements mushroomed in the 1990s, and, at the same time, the internet started to develop in China. The co-evolution of the internet and environmentalism has attracted scholarly attention on how the internet was used by environmental groups or ENGOs to contribute to green internet culture and social change (Yang, 2003a; Sima, 2011; Liu, 2011). As is shown in previous empirical studies, the internet has facilitated the growth of a counter-public sphere, which fosters green-speak as a counterweight against the discourse of rapid economic development (Yang & Calhoun, 2007; Sima, 2011).

In past years, the environmental crisis in China has reached an alarming level, signaled by severe air pollution across the country. The environmental problems have not only caused public health issues, economic loss, and social unrest but also have challenged Chinese leadership in terms of environmental governance. Environmental pollution is not only discussed online but has also become a major force in driving people to protest on the streets.

By the end of 2016, the number of internet users had reached 731 million, more than half of Chinese population. The internet has become an important tool for ordinary Chinese people to seek information and produce public discourse (Zheng and Wu, 2005). In the context of the environmental crisis and environmental governance, how the internet is used by Chinese citizens to engage informally in environmental politics is a pressing research question because institutional mechanisms for citizens to formally participate in environmental issues are still inadequate in China (Grano and Zhang, 2016). This study attempts to address this question by exploring the way everyday citizens talk about environmental issues online, and how this is intertwined with aspects and practices of everyday life. It offers, at the micro level, a glimpse into the processes of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization (Habermas, 1987: 138–139).
5.2 Chinese Internet and the Public Sphere in China

The liberating potential of the Chinese internet, which can potentially mobilize social actors to form a civil society online, has been the topic of much debate (Yang, 2003b; Zheng & Wu, 2005; Yang, 2009; Jiang, 2010; Lewis, 2013). Zheng and Wu (2005), for example, argue that “internet use by the mass public, civil society, the economy, and the international community” will foster a democratic transformation in China (p. 510). Similarly, Yang (2009) suggests that a “participatory and contentious” Chinese cyberculture has emerged with the widespread use of the internet, even under the government’s political control (p. 2). He argues that in the context of this cyberspace, various creative forms of online activism have developed through which netizens are empowered to watch, discuss, and mock political power. They occur in an interactive dynamic between ICTs and non-technological factors embedded in Chinese culture, society, and politics (Yang, 2009). Moreover, citizen journalists can nowadays use phones to record public events and then post the footage online, sometimes even working together with traditional media to overcome content control from the party (Xin, 2010). Under the censorship system, not every piece of information can be controlled and is controlled. According to a study by King et al. (2013), critiques of policy, political leaders, and the Chinese government are not strictly censored; heavy censorship is primarily geared towards content that aims to mobilize citizens for collective action, no matter whether they are supporting or opposing the party-state.

The Chinese internet is characterized as “a more pluralistic public sphere” because of a variety of critical voices expressed by participants (Lewis, 2013, p.22). He (2000) suggests that “a private discourse universe” exists in China, which is made up of informal conversation within personal networks outside formal public arenas such as official meetings, the mass media, and the public forum. In this informal discursive space, individuals can express their opinions, which might be competing with the dominant official discourses in formal settings. With the rise of ICTs, such private discourse has flourished on the internet as citizens go online or use text messages on their mobiles to discuss moral controversies and express deviant ideas, thus challenging the hegemony of the dominant discourse (He, 2008). Furthermore, powerless groups are enabled to counter the power hierarchy in Chinese society by expressing their personal feelings about private issues online, bringing these private issues into the public realm in the evolution of collective sentiments (Tong, 2015).
In spite of the internet’s potential to strengthen civil society in China, some scholars doubt whether the internet has had a real political impact, as the Chinese government continuously adopts new strategies to deal with the changing internet ecology and direct public opinion (Kalathil & Boas, 2003; Morozov, 2011; Sullivan, 2014). When online activities evolve, a series of control measures are employed by the state to maintain a ‘harmonious’ internet, damaging the incipient public sphere, such as computer filtering, which is not only a way to control content but also results in self-censorship (Kalathil & Boas, 2003). In addition, new censorship tactics are invented to shape online opinion in favor of the government such as hiring a ‘water army’ (amateur online commentators) to intervene in public discussions (Morozov, 2011).

Despite various surveillance tactics, it is increasingly challenging for the government to censor and control online activities and the expression of opposing views, the growth of the number of netizens, and popular forms of participation. Now the majority of the Chinese population has access to the internet; small-scale public participation becomes common. *Wangluo weiguan* (网络围观), translated as a “surrounding gaze online” (Hu, 2011), enables Chinese citizens to discuss and disseminate political issues in their daily use of the internet. Thus, their minimal expressions of preferences and wishes are uttered and accumulate into public opinion. Recognizing the complex dynamics between open networks and closed regimes in transitional countries, Kalathil and Boas (2003) suggest it is necessary to explore further whether the internet will open up these closed regimes and if this changes the socio-political and socio-cultural realities, as well as, individuals’ everyday lives.

### 5.3 Everyday Political Talk as an Agent of Change in Digital Age in China

To grasp the complexity of Chinese internet culture in the grey areas beyond familiar dichotomies between state and citizens, and the political and the non-political, scholars argue that it is crucial to conduct in-depth analysis of users’ online activities in relation to their everyday life realities (Yang, 2014; Yuan, 2015; Marolt, 2015; Wright et al., 2016). In the fragmented Chinese society with economic, regional, and cultural (lifestyle) divides (Damm, 2007), individual citizens’ online activities and power struggles at micro levels rooted in their everyday life need to be studied to understand the Chinese internet and politics. Marolt (2015) points out that “little is known about the ways in which the ‘online’ and the ‘offline’ is related in everyday China” (p.5). They affirm individuals’ agency of power developed in their everyday life experiences could tell more about why and how they
act online, thus providing more empirical evidence to understand whether their participation will or will not bring changes to the Chinese society at large.

To further explore the multi-dimensions of the Chinese internet, Yang (2014) has developed an analytical approach called “deep Internet studies”, emphasizing the significance of users’ everyday online experiences, including apolitical activities, in interpreting political contestation in Chinese digital spaces. Outside the formal political realm, popular cultural practices in everyday life have a multitude of political implications. The playful and humorous expression of *e gao* (online spoofs), for example, unlike rational debates, enables participants to mock the powerful and foster a sense of grassroots community, creating a new way of being political (Meng, 2011). Yu (2007a), therefore, argues that “the seemingly apolitical media practices of the consumer masses turned out to be political in the end as they influence the way people think about politics, culture and society” (p.424).

Everyday political talk refers to mundane and casual conversations through which citizens discuss and negotiate “what the public ought to discuss” outside of the state (Mansbridge, 1999, p. 215). People talk about politics every day, which is not aimed at any particular goal, but rather merely for the talk itself. By talking about an issue regularly in daily life, citizens ultimately obtain opportunities to draw public attention to it. In this sense, the activity of talking becomes political in itself because (when discussed online) it brings issues worthy of discussion to the public realm. Citizens negotiate issues of concern with others at the micro level (through everyday talk) to identify and understand what the issues are, how they (the issues in question) might influence their lives, and what changes they want in response (from the state). As Kim and Kim (2008) conclude, “everyday political talk itself might not be ideally deliberative nor reasonable, but it is perhaps the only practical way through which citizens construct and reveal their identities, understand others, produce rules and resources for deliberation, enhance their opinions, transform the domestic spheres into the public sphere, and bridge their private lives to the political world” (p.66).

These new ways of being political may be even more important in the context of China. Unlike Western countries where public participation is institutionalized in civic organizations, political participation for grassroots publics in China is unorganized (and not institutionalized). In addition, political events organized by citizens themselves are often oppressed in China; Chinese citizens turn to the internet to have a voice. Due to the lack of formal participatory channels for Chinese citizens, everyday political talk as an
effective way for citizens to participate in politics, has more political significance in China than in its Western counterparts. In current scholarship about Chinese internet studies, ‘new media events’ or ‘online events’ (Qiu & Chan, 2011), in which marginalized groups are empowered by digital media technologies as counter-publics to challenge the dominant discourse, have been amply examined. Political discussions in Chinese digital spaces are normally ‘episodic’ (Yang, 2006) and event-specific. However, to understand the nature of Chinese citizens’ online political conversations, it is necessary to extend the focus beyond event-centric issues to less subversive everyday life politics. As argued by Wright et al. (2016), such pre/proto-political talk in everyday life can be considered as a political action in and of itself in the context of Chinese society. Recognizing the crucial role of informal political conversations in the public sphere and the complex Chinese context, this chapter argues that everyday political talk is of great significance as an agent of change for Chinese society in the digital age.

5.4 Political talk about the environment in the Chinese green sphere

Rapid urbanization has not only created an economic boom in China but has also brought numerous environmental problems. In response, the Chinese government has reformed its environmental governance strategies, highlighting the importance of public participation; i.e., it provides a supportive political atmosphere for public participation in Chinese environmental politics. Moreover, citizens’ private concerns for better living conditions drive them to participate more in environmental issues even though most of them are not motivated by the ambition of democratic participation (Chen et al., 2015).

Being aware of the important role of the mass public in environmental justice and governance, the Chinese government proposed relevant laws and regulations, such as the Environmental Impact Assessment Law, to safeguard the publics’ participatory rights in environmental policy-making in the past two decades. This laid the foundation for the public’s right to effective and direct participation in environmental politics. Nevertheless, most of the laws are not implemented very well in reality due to the lack of detailed description about how to facilitate public participation and integrate public opinion in environmental policy-making (Chen et al., 2015). Furthermore, environmental participation is restricted by the top-down institutional structures in China, where the party-state is the main actor in making decisions. There are only limited channels for the public to voice their opinions in environmental policy-making.
A major force representing the public interest in environmental politics are Environmental NGOs, which emerged in the 1990s following the booming environmentalism in the world. Yang (2005) argues that ENGOs are active in leading the public in environmental participation and “open up channels (albeit limited) for citizens to participate directly in political processes” (p. 65). With the increasing participatory awareness, a “green public sphere” for citizens to debate and express different views has emerged in China (Yang & Calhoun, 2007). In the green public sphere, social organizations and citizens are the publics producing and consuming green discourse (Yang & Calhoun, 2007).

Albeit with the growth of green discourses, there are limitations to the green public sphere in China. Eberhardt (2015) finds, in his case study, little discourse about climate change by Chinese ordinary citizens in the green public sphere. Most of the green discourse is produced and constrained by government and elites such as experts, corporations, and ENGOs. Similarly, Sima (2011) argues that the green public sphere fails to involve the general public in everyday life, beyond ENGOs, activists, university intellectuals, and education sectors. Apparently, the green public sphere in China is not citizen-centric. At present, the dilemma of directly and effectively engaging ordinary citizens in debates on environmental issues and policies in the green public sphere still exists in China.

Being popular among a large population in China, the internet may serve as a direct channel for citizens to express environmental concerns. In the current green public sphere, environmentalists are very aware of the internet’s power and have been using it to engage the public in the articulation and dissemination of green-speak, expanding the public sphere in relation to environmental problems (Sima, 2011). Considering the limited opportunities for individual citizens affected by environmental issues to articulate their concerns and produce their own discourse, this paper looks into the potentials of internet use to effectively and directly engage the general public in Chinese environmental politics.

Environmental politics is embedded in multiple aspects of everyday life, such as water use, health, waste, energy consumption, air pollution, and other environmental impacts to daily life. These environmental issues have attracted a lot of public attention from the new middle class in urban China. Compared to other citizens, this relatively well-educated group has more awareness of public issues and is more concerned about the political system in China (Linde and Ekman, 2003). In the setting of everyday life, citizens’ claim for environmental rights, mostly, are not directly challenging the political regime. They are first and foremost, oriented to solutions for the environmental situation in China.
Political talk online thus enables ordinary people to express their ideas about issues relevant to their private interest. Furthermore, continuous everyday political talk online “prepares citizens, the public sphere and the political system at large for political action” (Graham, 2015). In order to see if everyday talk online effectively involves publics in Chinese environmental politics, this chapter first investigates the nature of everyday environmental talk in three online forums and then explores how the daily green-speak made by ordinary citizens shapes the Chinese green public sphere.

5.5 Methods
A comparative study of everyday political talk across three different Chinese online forums was conducted to better understand how ordinary Chinese citizens talk about environmental issues in different digital spaces. The three forums were selected based on their distinct features, ranging from a government-run political forum, a mixed (commercial-lifestyle) forum to a non-political (a commercial-topical) forum. Such an approach allows for a comparison of environmental talk between and across political, non-political, and mixed forums, providing more insight into the nature of political talk in China.

People.cn’s Qiangguo Luntan (meaning improve China) is hosted by the official online media branch of People’s Daily, as a “central propaganda space” (Jiang, 2010). It was established by people.cn on May 9, 1999, attempting to provide a space for nationalistic protest against NATO’s bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia. In line with this tradition of patriotism and nationalistic spirit, the forum was later called Qiangguo Luntan and became a platform where people talk about policy issues concerning the development of the country. Because it is affiliated to people.cn, this forum is perceived by internet users as a public space of authoritative influence where they can expose social problems to high officials and push controversial issues into local authorities’ policy agenda through higher-rank officials’ attention and pressure (Wang, 2011, p.238). Considering all these features, the Qiangguo Luntan was selected as a political discussion forum.

Baidu Tieba, literally a ‘post bar’, was started in 2003 by the Chinese search engine company, Baidu. This commercial-lifestyle forum became popular among grassroots users because of its entertainment-orientation as a place where people discuss games, comics, and other playful/funny stuff. With its popularity among grassroots, various non-mainstream subcultures and topics about societal issues emerge in this virtual space. In light of the entertaining and grassroots features of the forum, it was selected as a
mixed forum. Baidu users can choose to join specific bars (sub-forums) in accordance with their interests and hobbies. This commercial-lifestyle forum is open and accessible to every individual with internet access. For marginalized or less privileged people, they enjoy equal opportunity to make their concerns visible, regardless of their social status in reality. However, *Baidu Tieba* is not an independent space. Users’ practices on the platform are both shaped by the state, commercial forces, and the state-corporation dynamics.

*Yaolan* is a non-political (commercial-topical) forum, focusing on childcare and parenting in China. As embodied by its name ‘Yaolan’, which means cradle in Chinese, the commercial-topical forum was established in 1999 to help parents deal with problems in different stages of parenthood. It covers topics related to pregnancy, health and nutrition, child-care, and education. With access to digital media, young mothers often turn to *Yaolan* when they want to discuss issues concerning parenting and child-care. Although these issues tend to be private, they are likely to become issues about public policy as well. For instance, discussions about environmental policies sometimes are triggered by family stories shared by parents.

Identifying political talk in non-political spaces, and environmental talk in political ones, is in some ways like looking for ‘needles in a haystack’ (Graham, 2008). To overcome this problem, keyword searches were used to identify green-speak, which can be found in Table 5.1. Based on this set of keywords, threads where green-speak emerged were identified; after which, 25 threads per forum were selected. For bbs.people.cn, the sample consisted of 584 postings. Discussions on this government-run forum often begin with topics of explicit political nature, such as environmental policies, environmental news, policy proposals from citizens themselves, and stories told by citizens to complain about a particular policy. The *Baidu Tieba* sample consisted of 846 postings. Everyday environmental talk on *Baidu Tieba* mixed conventional environmental politics with people’s life experiences, such as how farmers in rural China deal with post-harvest crops-burning under environmental regulations, whether it’s reasonable to constrain families to buy cars to control air pollution, and what people should do when they discover emission of pollutants by industries in their living areas. The sample of environmental talk for the *Yaolan* forum consisted of 467 postings, covering a variety of topics such as air pollution, environmental education, and low-carbon lifestyle. These environmental topics mostly originated from participants’ private concerns in relation to environmental problems, for example, no fireworks for Spring Festival, protecting children from dangers of smog, and people’s experience with vehicle restriction rules.
Table 5.1: Keyword List for Environmental Talk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keywords</th>
<th>English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>雾霾/空气污染</td>
<td>Smog/Air pollution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>气候变化/全球变暖</td>
<td>Climate change/Global warming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>沙尘暴</td>
<td>Sandstorm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>节能减排</td>
<td>Energy conservation and pollution reduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>低碳环保</td>
<td>Low-carbon lifestyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>车辆限购/单双号限行</td>
<td>Curbing the purchase of vehicles for private use/ Odd-even numbered car ban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apec 蓝</td>
<td>Apec Blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>污染企业</td>
<td>Pollution industries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>环保热线/举报电话</td>
<td>Hot-lines for environmental protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>生态环境/生态保护/环保</td>
<td>Ecological environment/ Ecological protection/Environmental protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>抗霾行动/抵制雾霾/对抗雾霾</td>
<td>Anti-smog movement/Smog protest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>绿色出行</td>
<td>Green travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>环保法</td>
<td>Environmental Protection Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>水污染</td>
<td>Water pollution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To comprehensively capture the participatory characteristics of Chinese citizens in political discourses about the environment, a multilayered content analysis was conducted. A three-level coding scheme was developed to thoroughly assess the nature and quality of online political talk, focusing on the deliberativeness of such talk, other social-civic speech
acts, as well as the use of emotions. The unit of analysis was an individual post, each of which was coded at all three levels.

Drawing on Habermas’s theory of communicative action and the public sphere (1984, 1989), level one investigated the deliberativeness of political talk. Inspired by Graham’s (2008, 2009) coding scheme, the communicative process and form of discursive exchanges were assessed: *rationality* and *continuity of debate*; dispositional requirements for achieving mutual understanding: *reciprocity* and *sincerity*; and the norms of debate: *discursive equality*. Level two coding categories were developed inductively based on a pilot study. Moving beyond the normative framework of deliberation, this level focused on other communicative forms and speech acts, which include: *attention, complaining, questioning, storytelling* and *advice giving/helping*. Level three examined the use of *emotions* by participants: anger, sadness, fear, and happiness. To test the consistency of the coding scheme, an inter-coder reliability test was conducted. Calculating using Scott’s Pi, coefficients met appropriate acceptance levels ranging from .70 to .92 with *convergence, attention*, and *questionable sincerity* achieving perfect scores.

### 5.6 Findings and Discussion

**Level 1 Process of Deliberation**

The first normative condition under investigation was the level of *rationality*. As Table 5.2 shows, reasoned claims accounted for 28.8% of *Qiangguo Luntan’s* postings, while non-reasoned claims (i.e. assertions) accounted for 47.8% of the sample. Users of this political forum often expressed their ideas or claims, but they did not back these with reasoning very frequently. On *Baidu Tieba*, 40% of the postings contained expressions of political opinions. Almost half of these were reason-based arguments. Although participants expressed opinions less frequently on *Baidu Tieba*, they were more likely to use reasoning to support their claims than *Qiangguo Luntan* participants. On *Yaolan*, the expression of opinions was not as prevalent as on the other two forums, accounting for only 17.3% of the postings. Moreover, using reasoning to support one’s claim was the exception rather than the norm, accounting for merely 16% of the postings expressing claims.
Table 5.2: Communicative forms across forums (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication form</th>
<th>Qiangguo Luntan (N=584)</th>
<th>BaiduTieba (N=846)</th>
<th>Yaolan (N=467)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reasoned claims</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-reasoned claims</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocity (Replies)</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>68.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continued debate</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convergence</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degrading</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionable Sincerity</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The total percentages do not add up to 100 because the categories above are not mutually exclusive.

Our second indicator was *continuity*, which requires participants to engage in debate until mutual understanding is achieved. This was assessed in two ways, by measuring the level of extended debate and convergence. The level of extended debate refers to the frequency of continued interaction between participants via the use of arguments. So-called strong-strings were identified within threads: a minimum of three comments engaged in the exchange of claims (argumentation). By calculating the number of postings involved in strong strings, the level of extended debate was measured. As Table 5.2 reveals, on the *Qiangguo Luntan*, 8.6% of the postings were engaged in extended debates. In the example below, an extended debate emerged on whether air pollution controlling plans impact employment in China.

Seed Post:

出“环保”国力，不是GDP受到了什么影响，也不是什么导致了多少人失业，最大的影响恐怕还是影响了地方政府的卖地利益，更影响了某些实权人物的黑幕收入，因此，就把”GDP”和”就业”宰出来了，溜溜轻听，要换上级，这种损招，本身就是一大污染！

Comments:
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Among all the postings involved in such exchanges, 72% were reason-based arguments, indicating that extended debates were rational and critical. However, the low percentage of extended debate indicates that the level of interaction between disagreements is very limited on this government-run forum. Regarding convergence, as Table 5.2 shows, a very small proportion of the sample, only one thread, achieved convergence, with a partial assent expressed by a participant.

English translation:

(Initial argument) Seed post: Some people disagree with the idea of environmental protection because this policy forbids local governments to get profits by selling land illegally, not really because it slows down the growth of GDP or leads to unemployment....

(Opposing Opinion) Participant A: It’s necessary to take economic growth into account when working out plans for the environmental protection. All the plans to prevent pollutions are created in vain if it goes against economic development...Too much control to pollution impacts the economy, which, in turn, constrains environmental protection.

(Degrading) Participant B: It’s complete nonsense. It’s not worth debating.

(Rebuttal) Participant C: Why didn’t the government control environmental pollution from the beginning! (Also an example of complaining and questioning)

(Rebuttal) Participant D (Reply to A): The money allocated to industries to reduce pollution are all corrupted by officials in various names...That’s why industries discharge pollutants against regulations.
On *Baidu Tieba*, 10.2% of the postings were involved in extended-debates. Such exchanges were rational, critical, and reflexive; 81.4% of the postings involved contained reason-based arguments. In comparison to *Qiangguo Luntan*, exchanges of views were more likely to develop into extended debates on *Baidu Tieba*. That said, in both cases, the frequency of extended debate was low. In terms of convergence, such debates rarely led to commissive speech acts on *Baidu Tieba*, with only four postings coded as convergence. This is in line with *Qiangguo Luntan*.

On *Yaolan*, very few discussions developed into extended debate and no postings were coded for convergence, which was due to the low level of argumentation and the infrequent expression of opinions. The *Yaolan* forum seems to be a space where people are more reluctant to express disagreements and debate with one another.

Next, I looked at the level of reciprocity, which requires participants to listen and respond to what others are saying. As Table 5.2 reveals, only 25.5% of the postings were coded as replies in the *Qiangguo Luntan*. *Baidu Tieba* participants were more reciprocal with 40.8% of the sample coded as replies. It was in *Yaolan* where there was a high level of reciprocity; 68.3% of postings were coded as replies. *Yaolan* participants were much more interactive, and it seems participants connected with each other more than in the other two forums. The results here indicate that the level of reciprocity was higher when the nature of platform was less political and more social. When people talk about environmental issues in a less political or more social space (closer to everyday life experience), they become more connected with each other, (potentially) fostering a sense of community.

The fourth indicator was sincerity. Sincerity was examined by identifying acts of questionable discursive behavior, gauging the level of perceived sincerity – whether participants doubt/challenge the truthfulness/sincerity of other participants. As Table 5.2 shows, there were no posts coded as questionable sincerity.

Discursive equality, our fifth indicator, requires participants to respect, recognize, and treat each other as equals. Thus, postings were coded for those instances when participants actively degraded each other – to lower in character, quality, esteem, or rank. Overall, the level of degrading was low across all three forums. In *Qiangguo Luntan*, degrading accounted for only 4.1% of the sample. As the example above shows, User B was despising User A’s opinion, saying User A’ comment does not make any sense. The interesting thing is 18 of the 24 degrading posts came from one thread. In that thread, it
was argued that air quality in Shanghai was even worse in the days of Maoism than it is now, provoking a string of degrading exchanges among participants from opposing sides of the argument. As the example illustrates, this behavior originates from the severe ideological divide between the two camps.

As Table 5.2 indicates, on Baidu Tieba about 8% of postings contained degrading comments. Unlike the governmental and grassroots forums, there were no degrading behaviors on Yaolan, suggesting that Yaolan participants respected each other. Indeed, based on our qualitative reading of the threads, participants tended to be friendly which in turn fostered a social atmosphere. People were encouraged to talk and join discussions on Yaolan. For instance, participants often replied: “thanks for joining the discussion”.

**Level 2 Civic Behaviors**

During level two of the analysis, threads were examined for other social-civic behaviors. As Table 5.3 shows, complaining and questioning were popular on Qiangguo Luntan, representing 21.1% and 8.0% of all postings respectively. Complaining happens when participants express dissatisfaction about issues or events related to the environment. Questioning is a speech act used by citizens to directly criticize the authorities and pressure them to deal with environmental problems. First, complaining was often mixed with reasoned arguments, which typically reflected participants’ deep thinking on environmental problems. For instance, in a thread about water use, a participant argued that it is good and effective to raise public awareness about saving water by charging the public for extra water use because Chinese citizens don’t want to spend more money on water use; but the user complained about the non-transparent financial management of the money the government collected and argued that the government should think about investing the money they collect from the public in improving the water quality to secure public health due to the severe water pollution. Second, complaining was used in combination with questioning the legitimacy of policies or calling for accountability of authorities. The joint speech act of complaining and questioning empowered Chinese citizens to foster a debate with officials and pressure them to respond to environmental issues. In this example, a participant was both complaining and questioning the government’s development policy, treatment after pollution, expressing his or her discontent with the policy.

**Table 5.3: Civic behaviors (via speech acts) across forums (%)**
In line with Qiangguo Luntan, complaining represented 18.7% of Baidu Tieba's posts. Different from the ‘so-called’ irrational populist voice which Chinese authorities tend use to describe complaints from grassroots Chinese citizens, complaints were frequently combined with reasoned arguments to criticize the governments’ environmental policies. Another type of speech act, questioning, also contributes to making public criticism about environmental injustice stronger. Less frequent than on Qiangguo Luntan, Baidu Tieba participants too monitored governments’ environmental policies (or lack thereof) through questioning, which represented 3.8% of postings.

In addition to expressing criticism to the government, storytelling, providing advice/help, and social talk without political orientations occurred on Baidu Tieba as well. As Table 5.3 shows, participants were providing advice/help to each other in 4.3% of the sample. For instance, a participant felt puzzled about the accuracy of the city air quality index regarding the situation in far suburb rural areas with fewer industries; another participant helped him or her by explaining the situation and providing additional information. Through advice giving and helping, participants on Baidu Tieba could reach a deeper sense of trust for each other, contributing to a friendly atmosphere and a sense of community. Besides, storytelling accounted for 3.3% of the postings. In one thread, someone posted a photo of themselves in a sandstorm in Xinjiang Province (Northwest China). This was followed by more stories in which participants would compare the
environment in their hometown (Beijing) with that in Xinjiang. Others showed sympathy towards people living in Beijing or felt sad for them. These communicative acts of storytelling not only enriched the discussion by providing more background information but also created an environment conducive to bonding among participants.

Conversations on Baidu Tieba sometimes diverged from environmental issues. Most of the off-topic postings are intimate conversations (social talk) which are too personal to have a political connotation, accounting for almost one-fourth of the sample. Intimate conversations happen more frequently on Baidu Tieba than on the other two platforms. For example, a participant posted his/her experience of cycling in a thread, calling for a low-carbon lifestyle. Participants subsequently engaged in discussion in de-politicized and social ways such as warning them to cycle carefully and be safe or simply asking how much their bicycles cost. Although not explicitly political, these social conversations seemed to facilitate connections among participants, strengthening the community.

Similar to Qiangguo Luntan and Baidu Tieba, dissatisfaction about the rapidly deteriorating environment and environmental regulations in China was frequently expressed through the speech act of complaining on Yaolan. Complaining occurred in 18.2% of the sample. Critical questioning about corruption or government policies also occurred, but less frequently, representing 1.1% of all postings. For example, in one thread participants were complaining about vehicle registrations via a lottery system and were questioning authorities as to why they implemented the vehicle registration policy to restrict ordinary Chinese citizens’ right to buy cars and to curb traffic jams in Beijing.

Advice giving and helping was more frequent on Yaolan than the other two forums, representing 12.2% of the postings. Citizens provided advice and help to others on issues such as how to protect children from air pollution or how to save water in daily life, which was not only a way to practice their citizenship but also a way to form a sense of community among participants. As Table 5.3 indicates, storytelling too was much more prominent on Yaolan than on the other two forums, representing nearly a quarter of the sample. Much of this came in the form of replies, indicating that Yaolan participants were quite reciprocal when engaging in storytelling. As a way to make sense of the world, storytelling empowered citizens to form social connections with others. Moreover, as shown in discussions on Yaolan, the social connections formed in the process of sharing stories with others can be transferred into environmental associations established on the social basis of non-political activities. For instance, a participant proposed the idea of establishing an environmental
association for Moms after they shared stories about how to protect their children from environmental health risks. However, messages of this kind are often censored. Following this comment, participants stopped talking about this issue while several postings were censored by moderators. It is hard to say whether the censored postings were related to the issue of creating this environmental association or not, but postings about the formation of such associations/organizations are susceptible to censorship because they potentially provoke collective actions to fight against environmental pollution.

**Level 3 Expression of sentiments**

In this section, emotions were investigated to understand the affective dimension of the political talk about the environment across forums, attempting to explore the role of emotions in everyday environmental talk.

As Table 5.4 reveals, on the Qiangguo Luntan, 6% of the postings expressed some form of negative emotions including anger, fear, and sadness; anger was expressed most frequently. According to the results of cross-tabbing emotions with the speech acts discussed above, 65% of complaints were expressed via anger. Much of this was driven by public affairs such as government’s ineffectiveness in dealing with environmental problems and the implementation of a certain policy. Furthermore, based on closer analysis, satirical humor was used by participants and it, sometimes, prompted citizens to express negative emotions, like anger. The use of irony was popular among Qiangguo Luntan participants to ridicule government’s performance when it comes to protecting the environment by seemingly expressing their praise for, and agreement with, the official discourse. The satirical expressions helped to draw public’s attention to the issue and encouraged changes to deal with environmental problems.
Table 5.4 Emotions expressed across forums (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>QiangguoLuntan (N=584)</th>
<th>BaiduTieba (N=846)</th>
<th>Yaolan (N=467)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The total percentages do not add up to 100 because the categories above are not mutually exclusive.

Emotional expressions were most prominent on Baidu Tieba, in comparison to the other two forums, representing 18.2% of the sample. Mostly, they were negative feelings such as anger, sadness, and fear. Emotions, typically anger, were often expressed when conveying one’s opinion. Furthermore, anger was sometimes expressed when users degraded others or when users complained about some issues. Compared to Qiangguo Luntan, the expression of fear was slightly more frequent on Baidu Tieba, but still representing a very tiny proportion of the sample. Baidu Tieba participants expressed anger mostly in response to public matters such as environmental policies, which is similar to the government-run forum. When it came to fear, Baidu Tieba participants tended to be worried about environmental issues in relation to their private life. For example, a participant saw air quality warnings in her hometown; she expressed her feeling of panic. Such fears differed from those expressed by Qiangguo Luntan participants, which were more connected to the implementation of certain policies. Similar to Qiangguo Luntan, satirical humor was used when discussing the environment on Baidu Tieba. Witty language and sarcastic jokes were used to make fun of the bad environmental situation and criticize officials’ corruption and the government’s policies. Besides, satirical words sometimes triggered the expression of anger. In addition to political satire, participants...
used humor as a form of entertainment on Baidu Tieba by telling e.g. jokes, which seemed to foster and maintain their sense of community and shared identity as grassroots publics.

On the Yaolan forum, emotions were expressed in 11.3 % of the postings, less frequent than on the grassroots forum, Baidu Tieba, but more frequent than on the political forum, Qiangguo Luntan. Unlike the other two forums, Yaolan participants expressed fear more than other emotions. Based on a closer examination, 18.8 % of the sentiment of fear was expressed when participants were complaining about the deteriorating environment in China. For example, participant A commented: This is too horrific. The air people breathe is not clean anymore. Participant B replied: “Alarming phenomenon! Will life disappear from earth someday”? The second prominent emotion expressed on Yaolan was anger, 67 % of which was expressed via complaining. The feelings of fear and anger were, mostly, triggered by their concerns about their own life impacted by environmental problems. Yaolan participants too expressed their feelings and attitudes towards the environmental issues via humor. Instead of criticizing the government, humor was used to make fun of the poor environmental quality, creating a funny and friendly atmosphere, again connecting participants, fostering a sense of community.

5.7 Conclusion

Everyday environmental talk online expands the green public sphere to the very grassroots level, in which average citizens are the main actors to produce green discourses, instead of the authorities, elites, corporations, and/or social organizations. With the rise of internet use and the relatively loose political climate regarding environmental reform, ordinary Chinese citizens are provided with more freedom to voice their true opinions and passions about environmental issues in the public sphere. A type of environmentalism based on ordinary citizens’ voice is emerging in the online green sphere.

Based on the findings of this empirical study, everyday political talk about environmental issues in Chinese digital spaces does not necessarily lead to ‘deliberative’ talk and mutual understanding among netizens, which is the ‘core’ of the ‘public sphere’. Rather, it gives rise to multiple forms of civic engagement and reveals a variety of grassroots forces from ordinary individuals in the everyday green public sphere. Citizens were active in voicing their opinions and showing their attitudes about environmental issues in China, although extended, rational-critical debate among netizens on the three forums was infrequent. Rather, average citizens tended to engage in environmental politics through other social-civic communicative forms in the green public sphere. For instance,
Chinese citizens were involved in everyday political contention, challenging the authorities through their daily expression of complaints and anger about environmental degradation and the government’s ineffective environmental policies, especially on the Qiangguo Luntan. More frequently, citizens did not confront the state power directly, but rather they shared their everyday life stories and feelings on the environmental crisis with others, bonding people together. On Baidu Tieba and Yaolan, participants circumvented censorship from forum moderators by discussing environmental issues in a latent and less confrontational way. These non-deliberative acts help to make personal issues into public issues, transform ordinary citizens into engaged publics, and fostering a sense of community among participants, as a new way of being political. The weak ties formed in these interpersonal exchanges might generate new associational spaces expanding the networked green public sphere and allowing for greater individual agency by citizens. In these digital spaces, Chinese citizens showed their willingness and desire to participate in the policy-making process about environmental issues. Moreover, it opens up spaces for ordinary Chinese people to develop their everyday citizenship via mundane online practices of providing advice/help on what to do to improve the environmental situation within the realm of their private everyday life, which was quite common on the mixed and the non-political forums.

The three forums clearly provide different contexts for daily political talk about environmental issues due to their diverging affordances. Qiangguo Luntan, the government-supported online forum, provides a political space where citizens interested in policy and politics can go to discuss environmental issues on a daily basis. As observed, citizens complained a lot about environmental policies and corruption involving authorities in the field of environmental protection and expressed their worries about the implementation of environmental policies by local governments, without directly challenging the central party-state. In this political space closely connected to the state, citizens enjoy the freedom to discuss and criticize environmental policies and possibly influence policy interpretation and implementation. However, citizens do not have a chance to influence directly the process of environmental policymaking because they cannot interact with policy-makers on this government-run forum. Therefore, Qiangguo Luntan, actually, helps the government to enhance their transparency, meanwhile opening up opportunities for everyday political talk about the environment, but it lacks direct channels for Chinese citizens to hold their government accountable.
Yaolan, a non-political forum, offers Chinese citizens a private context to discuss environmental issues encountered in their everyday life. In most cases, political talk about environmental issues emerged when citizens discussed issues concerning their personal interests. In this non-political space, private everyday talk about environmental issues is a mechanism for citizens to discuss concrete environmental problems and policies affecting their life. By doing so, these become public, and inspire citizens to think about what they can do themselves to improve the environment. Here, everyday political talk can help citizens find ways to hold authorities accountable, without provoking resistance against the regime. However, all the environmental issues citizens talked about were mainly what middle-class citizens face within the urban setting, such as air quality in cities, green lifestyle, and the purchase of a car. The green discourse formed in this non-political space remains exclusive to some extent because it failed to address the issues lower-class people like rural residents and the disadvantaged in cities face in their daily life.

Baidu Tieba, a mixed forum, provides citizens both public and private context to practice everyday political talk about environmental issues. In this overlapping space between the political and non-political realm, citizens talked about environmental policy issues based on their life experiences and also discussed private issues concerning environmental problems. Participants not only criticized environmental policies, they also shared environmental problems they encountered in their personal lives and made them visible to the public via multiple civic behaviors. On this platform, everyday environmental talk is a mechanism to empower and vitalize bottom-up forces from ordinary citizens. Environmental talk, sometimes, developed into talk about flaws of the regime and calls for democratic change. In addition, this grassroots platform included the voice from lower-class residents, talking about water pollution, pollutant factories, and certain policies which affect people’s lives in county-level cities and rural regions.

Although the internet opens up an everyday and continuous space for political discourse and civic expression on environmental issues in China, the everyday green public sphere is not independent. On the one hand, everyday environmental talk on the internet is subject to surveillance strategies implied by the state to limit the power of the internet in facilitating civic engagement in the Chinese green public sphere. For example, when citizens discuss forming an environmental protection association among individual parents, the relevant content was censored on Yaolan. On the other hand, commercial forces do not always play a helpful role in assisting the development of the everyday green public sphere in China. As found on the commercial forums, Yaolan and Baidu Tieba,
some of the users who joined the discussions on environmental issues, actually, aimed to promote their products, such as air purifiers or healthy food, for private profits. Moreover, the commercial interests of the platforms sometimes cause submission to the state power to avoid conflicts with the government, at the cost of public values. For example, politically mobilizing content was very strictly controlled on the non-political, commercial forum, *Yaolan*.

Despite the intervention of state and commercial power into the everyday green public sphere, we still can see the changes of state-society relations in the context of environmental crisis and governance in China. In digital spaces, general Chinese publics are very active in expressing their ideas, views, emotions, and proposing suggestions to avoid environmental degradation, be it political space or non-political space. Their discussion about what should be considered and receive public attention in the green public sphere is not only a channel for the policy-makers to get feedback about public concern on environmental issues but also a way for average citizens to build and practice their participatory capacity in environmental politics. Everyday environmental talk online serves as an informal mechanism for citizens to directly participate in environmental politics in China. This informal mechanism potentially signals new ways to involve the public in the politics of other social arenas as well.