7. Complaining and sharing personal concerns as political acts

How everyday talk about childcare and parenting on online forums increases civic engagement in China

7.1 Introduction

With the fundamental social and economic transformations that Chinese society has gone through in the past decade, childcare and parenting issues have become an important social and political topic. We argue that these increasingly bridge the everyday private life worlds of Chinese citizens and the public domain, and thus foster civic engagement. Although childcare is still perceived primarily as a private duty rather than the state’s responsibility, parents’ struggles to improve the well-being of their children also involve politics and public policies. Embodied in families’ mundane child-rearing experiences, there are a variety of structural problems in child welfare in China, which blur public-private boundaries. For instance, children from different family backgrounds may experience social inequality regarding healthcare services and educational resources. Also, limited schooling choices and healthcare for rural children often discourage migrant workers from taking their children with them to the cities, generating issues around ‘left-behind children’. In this context, the voice of ordinary citizens – making hidden family difficulties salient as public problems – are of significant importance for the transformation of Chinese society at large because they open up spaces for public deliberation and civic engagement.

This chapter explores how the private and the public are connected in everyday online discussions about childcare concerns that Chinese families face. At present, China has a strict internet censorship system, which constrains citizens’ freedom to post things that may potentially lead to collective action or protest while tolerating a certain amount of public grievances towards the government and policy issues (King et al., 2013). As a consequence, the boundaries between the public and private sphere are constantly contested and (re-)negotiated in online exchanges. Sun (2012) has shown how migrant workers use digital devices to share their private life and laboring experiences, speak out
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on social inequality they suffer, and develop alternative discourses in the public realm in China. This has important implications for the public sphere. On the one hand, this is a domain where the state calls upon citizens to argue in the country’s interest and place their personal troubles second to the public good. Yet, at the same time, a space has come into place where citizens, within certain limitations, can defend their private interests (Wong, 1997). This constant maneuvering between control and a certain level of openness and critique is part and parcel of official government policy, which carefully tries to guide processes of modernization to safeguard stability in society.

Against this backdrop, this paper investigates citizen deliberation, other social-civic communication and emotional expressions by examining everyday online political talk about childcare and parenting issues. This chapter explores the extent to which a civic sphere emerges when private concerns become public issues as a result of the family-state dynamics in everyday life. In current Chinese scholarship on the internet’s political impact on society, most studies have focused on the explicitly political which normally involves formal politics of the state: either liberal empowerment (Tai, 2006; Zheng and Wu, 2005) or government control (Morozov, 2011, Qiu, 1999; Taubman, 1998). This body of research tends to be constrained within dichotomous binaries such as political versus non-political, state versus society, and control versus resistance. It is clear that everyday online practices, which do not necessarily involve the state, are neglected in these approaches. Therefore, this chapter moves beyond formally political spaces by studying Chinese citizens’ everyday communicative practices (i.e., informal political talk) in online spaces centered on lifestyle issues, examining how the political emerges outside of the formal political sphere.

More specifically, it investigates political talk in three popular online discussion forums ranging from the center to the periphery of politics. First, it examines how the ‘political’ emerges in everyday talk, beyond the formal political sphere, in online spaces dedicated to lifestyle issues such as popular culture and parenting. Then, the nature of such talk, focusing on both its deliberative qualities and informal characteristics, is examined. The chapter illustrates how the internet opens up new channels for ordinary Chinese citizens, who typically have no formal access to policy-makers, to articulate their needs, concerns, and experiences related to childcare issues. Shared spaces have emerged online where citizens can come together to talk about daily life issues such as raising children and other everyday activities. Rooted in these mundane conversations, counter-discourses emerge that challenge and engage with state power.
7.2 Bridging the private sphere and the civic sphere

In political thought, the family is located at the center of private life, separate from the public realm of the state. While arguing that such divisions are socially constructed and contested, some scholars have maintained however that the public and the private are interconnected (see, e.g., Pitkin, 1981). In his book *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills (1959) discusses how private troubles and public issues are intertwined. For Mills, personal troubles have to do with an individual, limited within ‘the social setting that is directly open to his personal experience and to some extent his willful activity’, while public issues transcend the everyday environment of individuals, dealing with the institutional structures of such social settings (p.8). Private troubles of milieu and public issues of social structures are connected because personal activities are often rooted in social and historical structures.

The family – serving as the site of childcare and parenting – is located at a distance from state agencies responsible for providing child welfare in China. The government’s social welfare policy regarding childcare is currently targeted only at orphaned, abandoned, or disabled children (Ringen and Ngok, 2017). In all other cases, parents usually act as the agents to speak for children and themselves in articulating their needs to and making demands from the state. Everyday family problems concerning childcare and parenting cover a wide range of issues such as access to kindergarten and pre-school education; the women’s role as mother and professional in the job market; and domestic violence and child abuse. These problems are all linked to both private troubles and public issues, blurring the public-private boundaries. However, despite the links they have with child welfare policies, educational resources, and legislation on child protection, childcare and parenting are considered private issues, which fall short of state support in China today.

Improving the livelihood of children in ordinary families is left to the family itself with little to no support from the state. For instance, low-income families face high financial barriers when wanting to send their children to quality pre-schools and kindergartens. Although the Chinese government continues to provide funding to public kindergartens run by the Ministry of Education, these educational resources merely benefit children of civil servants and high-income families. Children from medium- to low-income families are limited to community-organized or private kindergartens. Today, the number of community-organized kindergartens is steadily shrinking due to the lack of financial aid from the state; and private kindergartens are only accessible to children whose parents can
afford expensive pre-school fees. The state funding system has led to polarization among different types of kindergartens, which has exacerbated greater inequality in Chinese children’s opportunities to obtain quality pre-school services (Zhang and Maclean, 2012). As shown in families’ concerns about access to schools, children’s own well-being and the collective well-being of families closely rely on the state’s childcare policies.

7.3 Everyday Political talk in Chinese online public sphere

In Western democratic countries, structural, rational, and rule-based public deliberation in formal settings like courts, parliaments, and other institutional fora has been regarded as the core of the deliberative system (Elster, 1998; Fishkin, 1991). However, as Mansbridge (1999) argues, political discussions among political parties, elites, and experts in spaces close to the core, and everyday talk among citizens in informal spaces far from the center, are all vital components of the deliberative system. Similarly, Coleman (2007) asserts, that beyond the formally political, there are ‘potential spaces of democracy’ in the setting of everyday life where ordinary individuals can actively negotiate with power in more informal ways.

As an important way for citizens to interact with other citizens in the public arena, everyday talk plays a crucial role in citizens’ political life. First, ordinary political conversations bridge the personal sphere and the political sphere, creating a more integrated lifeworld (Wyatt, Katz and Kim, 2000). Second, everyday political talk prepares citizens to conduct formal deliberations by helping them to be more informed about public affairs and formulate better arguments, encouraging citizens to develop their subjectivities and understand others, and promoting the exchange of preferences among citizens (Bennett, Flickinger and Rhine, 2000; Conover and Searing, 2005, Price and Cappella, 2002; Kim and Kim, 2008). Third, and most importantly, everyday political talk is more accessible to ordinary citizens, including marginalized groups, than elite deliberation in formal settings (Zhang, 2010).

As the internet and digital technologies have become more and more affordable and accessible, they are increasingly being integrated into the everyday lives of ordinary Chinese citizens. The internet-based everyday sphere may be of more significance in the Chinese context than in Western countries. Unlike Western states where public participation is institutionalized by civic organizations, state-registered organizations in China play a limited role in promoting civic engagement as they are dependent on the state (Chan and Qiu, 1999). Due to the lack of autonomy for civil organizations, not all voices
are channeled through the associational networks of civil society into a public sphere. In light of the lack of formal channels for political participation in China, informal and small-scale discursive spaces are considered important alternative structures through which civic engagement potentially can occur (Zhang, 2006). In the current socio-political context of China, the most significant public value of the internet might be that it opens up alternative spaces for citizens to informally participate in politics (Yang, 2009; Yang and Calhoun, 2007).

Witnessing the rapid diffusion of the internet in Chinese society, scholars have long debated the potential impacts of such change for politics and civic engagement. Optimists believe that the wide use of the internet promises a booming public sphere; i.e., they argue that the internet has extended citizens’ access to information (Zheng and Wu, 2005), facilitated open debates and pluralist discussion of issues (Lewis, 2013), contributed to counter discourses in online deliberation (Yang and Calhoun 2007; Jiang, 2010c), and has become a hub for citizen activism (Yang, 2009). However, skeptics question the narratives of the digital revolution, pointing towards the political inactiveness of Chinese citizens and the uncivil nature of the Chinese internet, thus doubting the possibilities of the emergence of a deliberative public sphere in China through the internet (Leibold, 2011; Damm, 2007). Other scholars consider it a tool of authoritarian control, suppressing online political expressions by using various controlling tactics such as computer censorship systems, adaptive strategies, and real-name registration policies (Kalathil and Boas, 2003; Morozov, 2011; Mackinnon, 2011).

Thus far, the literature on the political implications of the Chinese internet has demonstrated both the (dis)empowerment effect of online deliberation and activism, and the state’s control and adaptation of the internet into the logic of authoritarian governance. Although the dichotomous approach of studying the Chinese internet (empowerment versus control and state versus society) has contributed valuable insights in understanding the dynamics of information technology, politics, and society, this chapter argues that it overlooks the complexity and plurality of the Chinese internet in relation to the hierarchical power structures in China. Referring to Yang’s (2014) proposal for ‘deep Internet studies’, which aims to transcend these dichotomous binaries, this chapter moves beyond the interplay between state and society at the macro level, to instead focus on the less subversive everyday online political talk among unorganized citizens. This allows us to capture the complexity and plural nature of the Chinese online public sphere.
7.4 Research focus and methodology

Online discussion forums (BBS forums) are very popular among the Chinese population. Because they are open to content as diverse as popular culture, lifestyle issues, or entertainment, they provide communicative spaces for Chinese citizens to get together and talk about family life, thus fostering an everyday social space in their lifeworld. The discussions on such forums not only bear the social-civic culture where communicative actions take place, but also reflect the informal characteristics of everyday talk. Therefore, the deliberativeness of online political talk as set-out by Habermas (1984, 1989), along with (other) social-civic communicative practices and emotional expressions anchored in civic culture, beyond the norms of deliberation (Dahlgren, 2002), are analyzed. This inclusive analysis enables us to focus on the social-cultural prerequisites of civic engagement, moving beyond the confines of Western (formal) frameworks of deliberation. It helps us to better understand the characteristics of citizen interactions in the Chinese online public sphere, allowing us to construct a grounded model of deliberation and a more integrated notion of the public sphere. Consequently, the following research questions are addressed in this article:

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

RQ2. What social-civic communicative practices and emotional expressions, beyond the framework of deliberation, emerge in everyday political talk?

This chapter also compares the nature of political talk across three popular Chinese forums to improve our understanding of communication and participation in everyday online spaces. Our three forums include a government-run political forum; a commercial-lifestyle (social) forum where politics is mixed with lifestyle issues; and a seemingly non-political commercial-topical forum, which aims to help people deal with parenting/childcare issues. This leads to the final research question:

RQ3: How do the forum’s aims and characteristics impact the nature of everyday political talk?
The Three Forums

Qiangguo Luntan (Strengthening the Nation Forum) is hosted by the official online media branch of People’s Daily as a ‘central propaganda space’ (Jiang, 2010c). It was established by people.cn in 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 became a governmental platform where people talk about policy issues concerning the development of the country. The forum is perceived as an important political instrument of the party and state. It now functions as a feedback mechanism for the central government, collecting citizens’ opinions about public policies and local developments. As a state-run forum, it is perceived by citizens as a place where the government can hear their voice in politics.

Baidu Tieba, literally meaning a ‘post bar’, was started in 2003 by the Chinese search engine company, Baidu. Tieba became popular among grassroots users because of its entertainment orientation. As one of the most popular lifestyle/hobby-based online communities, this commercial-lifestyle forum is open and accessible to every individual. With its popularity among grassroots, various non-mainstream subcultures and civic talk about societal issues emerge in this virtual space.

The Yaolan forum was established in 1999 to help parents deal with problems in different stages of parenthood. As embodied by its name ‘Yaolan’, which means cradle in Chinese, the commercial-topical forum covers topics related to pregnancy, health and nutrition, childcare, and education. Yaolan is one of the top parenting forums in China, providing a social place for young parents to gather together and talk about parenting and childcare issues.

On the three forums, posts are daily managed by forum moderators. First, all three forums are administered based on the general moderation rules created by the state to regulate internet usage in China (Qiu, 1999; Taubman, 1998). For instance, participants are not allowed to post content that violates constitutional law, tries to overthrow state power, and harms the national interest. Moreover, posts generating social unrest such as an illegal demonstration, other collective actions, or illegal associational activities are prohibited. Improper posts spreading ‘rumors’, involving defamatory comments, inciting violence and crime, creating discrimination against minorities are also heavily censored.
The forums are also managed in line with the aims and goals of each platform. On *Qiangguo Luntan*, posts are pre-moderated by staff, which serves the forum’s goal of collecting public opinion for policy making for the state. When the forum moderators censor participants’ messages, they receive no explanations. *Tieba*, a commercial-lifestyle platform, operates simultaneously under the influences of political power, commercial power, and the public interest. The moderation team may censor (content in) posts by finding the balance between commercial pursuits and the public interest (e.g., checking the content of advertisements to prevent harm to *Tieba* users), and also by following the internet regulations implemented by the Chinese government (see the *Tieba* terms and agreements at http://tieba.baidu.com/tb/eula.html). Normally, moderators directly block or delete messages if they violate moderation rules without explanation. On *Yaolan*, pre-moderation is implemented based on the general internet moderation rules (as discussed above) and the forum’s main goal, which is to help parents with parenting and childcare issues. *Yaolan* participants are usually given the opportunity to interact and negotiate with moderators if they are not happy with moderation. In the non-political context, moderation seems to be more transparent and negotiable in comparison to the other two forums.

**Sampling**

Identifying political talk about parenting and childcare issues in non-political spaces is like looking for ‘needles in a haystack’ (Graham, 2008). In order to address this problem, keyword searches were used to identify threads where political talk about childcare and parenting emerged (see Appendix 7.1). Using established procedures for identifying political talk (Graham, 2008), 25 threads per forum were randomly selected. For *Qiangguo Luntan*, the sample consisted of 616 posts. Discussions on this government-run forum often began with topics of explicit political nature, such as child welfare policies and relevant news. The *Tieba* sample consisted of 1128 posts. Everyday talk on *Tieba* was mainly about families’ daily experiences regarding childcare and parenting. For *Yaolan*, the sample consisted of 691 posts, mostly originating from participants’ private family concerns.
Content Analysis

A content analysis was adopted as the primary method for examining the nature of online political talk. A three-part coding scheme was developed to assess the deliberativeness of political talk while capturing and examining other social-civic communicative practices and the use of emotional expressions. The unit of analysis was the individual post, and all posts were coded within the context of the thread in which they were situated.

Drawing on Habermas’s theory of communicative action and the public sphere (1984, 1989), the deliberativeness of political talk was investigated. Inspired by Graham’s (2008) coding scheme, the following normative conditions were operationalized: the process of rational-critical debate (rationality, continuity, and convergence), dispositional requirements for achieving mutual understanding (reciprocity and sincerity), and the norms of debate (discursive equality). Subsequently, beyond the normative framework of deliberation, a second group of coding categories, which are rooted in a literature review and an initial pilot study, were applied. The other social-civic communicative forms included: complaining, questioning, storytelling, advice giving/helping, and social talk. Finally, the third group of categories examine the use of emotions by participants: anger, sadness, fear, and happiness. The coding categories and measures are discussed in more detail below.

To improve the reliability of the coding scheme, correcting measures were adopted at different stages of development. As mentioned above, a pilot study was done to test the initial coding scheme for functionality, to see whether the normative indicators could be operationalized to code posts on Chinese forums, and to observe and identify new communicative practices. Next, an inter-coder reliability test was conducted on a random sample of 12% of the collected threads, to test the consistency of the coding scheme. Calculating using Scott’s Pi, coefficients met appropriate acceptance levels ranging from .70 to .92 with convergence and questionable sincerity achieving perfect scores.

7.5 Findings

Level 1 Normative conditions of deliberation

To examine the deliberativeness of everyday political talk, we first investigated the level of rationality. Rationality refers to participants’ use of reasoning to justify their views/claims, a crucial element of the Habermasian public sphere. It was measured based on the presence or absence of the following characteristics: posts that were on topic, which
contained an explicit assertion supported by an expressed justification, which provided external evidence such as facts, sources, examples, or personal experiences, were coded as *reasoned claims*.

As Table 7.1 reveals, the exchange of claims accounted for 68.0% of Qiangguo Luntan’s posts. However, non-reasoned claims (assertions) represented nearly two-thirds of these. Although Qiangguo Luntan participants often expressed their views on childcare issues, assertions were the most prevalent speech act, accounting for 41.9% of posts while reasoned claims represented 26.1%. On Tieba, the exchange of claims was less frequent compared to Qiangguo Luntan, accounting for 35.6% of posts. However, Tieba participants tended to be more rational than Qiangguo Luntan participants with assertions accounting for substantially less of the total claims made (42% compared to 62%). That said, the use of assertions was more common than reasoned claims among Tieba participants, representing 20.8% of posts compared to 14.8%. Finally, similar to Tieba, the exchange of claims accounted for 37.3% of Yaolan’s posts. Again, it was the use of non-reasoned claims that was most common in Yaolan, representing a fourth (25.3%) of all posts compared to 12.0% for reasoned claims.

**Table 7.1: Indicators of Deliberation (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Qiangguo Luntan (N=616)</th>
<th>Tieba (N=1128)</th>
<th>Yaolan (N=691)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reasoned claims</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-reasoned claims (assertions)</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuity</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convergence</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocity (replies)</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>70.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionable sincerity</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degrading</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: the categories above are not mutually exclusive.
The next two indicators under the process of rational-critical debate were *continuity* and *convergence*, which requires that participants engage in debate until some form of agreement is achieved. First, the level of extended debate was measured via the presence of *strong-strings* (the depth of argument exchange). A strong-string refers to a minimum of a three-argument interaction. Convergence – the level of agreement achieved during political talk – was measured by identifying commissive speech acts.

As Table 7.1 indicates, on *Qiangguo Luntan*, the level of continuity and convergence was low; extended debate accounted for only 4.9% of posts while acts of convergence were rare (0.2%). When extended debate did occur, it was on threads initiated by ordinary netizens (issues they raised) rather than threads on news/policy initiated by the forum staff. On *Tieba*, extend debate was much more common than on *Qiangguo Luntan* with 14% of posts involved in strong-string interactions. For example, *Tieba* participants actively engaged in extended debate on the issue of whether parents should buy houses in ‘good’ school zones as a means of gaining access to quality education for their children. However, even in these threads, acts of convergence were rare, accounting for 1.5% of all posts. Similar to *Qiangguo Luntan*, the level of extended debate on *Yaolan* was low, representing 3.0% of posts; there were no acts of convergence.

The second set of indicators – *reciprocity* and *sincerity* – refer to the dispositional requirements for achieving mutual understanding. Put simply; reciprocity requires that participants read and respond to each other’s posts. It was measured based on whether a post was a reply to another post. Posts were coded as replies if they responded to another post directly (via the platform’s reply function) or indirectly (latently responding to another post without using the reply function). Sincerity requires that all claims, arguments, and information provided during the discussion be sincere and truthful. However, since it is difficult to judge if posters are telling the truth, this condition was measured by identifying those instances when participants challenged or expressed doubt concerning the truthfulness/sincerity of another participant’s posts.

As Table 7.1 shows, the level of replies on *Qiangguo Luntan* was low; replies accounted for 15.7% of posts. However, reciprocity was much higher in both the commercial-lifestyle and commercial-topical forums; 53.1% and 70.2% of *Tieba* and *Yaolan*’s posts were coded as replies. Overall, the results indicate that participants were more reciprocal in the forums that were more social than political in nature. On *Tieba* and *Yaolan*, it seems citizens were motivated to engage in mutual exchanges with fellow participants and encouraged to contribute to the building of an online community. Thus,
when political talk emerged, it was a more reciprocal affair on these forums than on *Qiangguo Luntan*.

Regarding sincerity, in all three forums, our analysis identified no posts that challenged/questioned one’s sincerity. This does not mean that participants’ posts were necessarily a true reflection of their own opinions. For instance, online commentators hired by the government, the ‘fifty-cent army’ (Han, 2015c: 111), may manipulate the process of public discussion to guide public opinion by employing purposeful framing and discursive strategies. As Han points out, netizens sometimes can detect such commentators based on their blatant pro-government tone. There was no reason to assume that this was the case, however. Moreover, these commentators are less likely to engage in debates on non-contentious (thought to be private) issues like childcare and parenting, especially in social orientated forums such as *Tieba* and *Yaolan*.

The final condition was *discursive equality*, which deals with the norms and rules of debate. It requires that participants respect and recognize each other as having an equal voice/standing within the deliberative process. It was measured based on the presence or absence of *degrading* comments: posts that degrade – to lower in character, quality, esteem, or rank – another participant’s claim, opinion, or person.

On all three forums, participants talked about childcare issues respectfully and civilly. As Table 7.1 indicates, acts of degrading were rare, accounting for less than 2% of posts in all three cases. Though this cannot be confirmed, these findings may partly be explained by the (pre)moderation strategies, as discussed above, employed by the forums. As one might expect, when uncivil behavior did occur, it was typically directed at participants with opposing political views. It is worth noting that such behavior led recipients to provide more reasoning and external evidence to support their claims, thus increasing the level of rationality and extended debate.

**Level 2 Other social-civic communicative practices**

Moving beyond the normative conditions of deliberation, other social-civic communicative forms were examined to explore their potential political implications. Due to the lack of opportunities to participate in collective action, Chinese citizens often employ the speech act of *complaining* to express their dissatisfactions with the state regarding particular public issues. As a form of personal communication with authority, complaining functions
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as a form of citizen dialogue with state institutions. Complaints shed light on citizens’ subjectivities, civic practices, and power relations. Moreover, mass complaining online often functions as an indirect force for political change in the internet era. Similar to complaining, questioning is another way for citizens to critique the state and pressure authorities to make changes in indirect ways.

As Table 7.2 shows, on Qiangguo Luntan, complaining and questioning represented 26.3% and 5.8% of posts respectively. Childcare issues raised by participants were mostly framed as public policy issues in this explicitly political space as opposed to being defined as common concerns of the private sphere. The grievances expressed concerned issues such as children protection policies, unequal educational opportunities, grandparents and childcare concerning migrant workers in rural China, divorce policies, and so on. These issue-specific complaints usually targeted relevant authorities, often turning into hardened resistance against the state’s current child welfare policies and, on occasions, even turning into cynical criticism of the political system. However, the tone of complaining and questioning was sometimes softened by humorous expressions or citizens’ ironical use of nationalistic discourses. In the example below, a participant commented on a thread revealing the poverty problems in remote villages in China, stating: ‘Nonsense. How should you have denied “the great achievement” of the reform and opening-up policy! Things like this only happen in Africa’. To critique the party-state its nationalist discourse was hold against it. In another thread about school bullying, a participant confronted the party-state in a joking tone with the lack of anti-bully policies at schools: ‘Oh my Party (CCP), my dear Mom (CCP), how to protect your underage children from violence?’

Qiangguo Luntan thus acts as a barometer of public concern. By allowing the online expression of public grievances, the government can gauge citizens’ concerns about childcare policies, accommodate these complaints into their policy-making, improve governance, and win legitimacy. In this way, social conflicts around specific child welfare issues are resolved, and, at the same time, the dichotomous relationship between the state and citizens is diluted. Making forceful complaints to policy-makers and communicating discontent to pressure the state into offering more support to families and children with social services, education, and safety protection shows how Qiangguo Luntan users deal with authorities and solve problems they are confronted with. Complaining is considered more than a civic behavior and part of a broader political process. If individual complaints about child welfare are not dealt with effectively by authorities, discontent may resurface,
leading to continued grievances and generating further contention. Thus, sustained tensions may be resolved by authorities or can lead to gradual changes overtime. In this sense, civic complaining online is an important way for ordinary Chinese citizens to get involved in the political process and practice their civic agency.

Table 7.2: Other Social-Civic Communicative Practices (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civic behavior</th>
<th>Qiangguo Luntan (N=616)</th>
<th>Tieba (N=1128)</th>
<th>Yaolan (N=691)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complaining</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice/giving/helping</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storytelling</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social talk</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: the categories above are not mutually exclusive.

On Tieba and Yaolan, fewer posts involved complaining, representing 18.3% and 14.2% of their posts respectively, while the act of questioning was uncommon. Complaints about childcare issues were mainly discussed as private concerns as opposed to public policy-related issues. Both Tieba and Yaolan participants tended to raise issue-specific complaints based on their personal experiences and self-interest, such as how to protect their child from children trafficking, looking for 'good' school districts, domestic violence, and stories told by migrant parents regarding leaving their children behind in rural villages. Moreover, unlike Qiangguo Luntan participants, whose complaints were primarily directed at (state) authorities, Tieba and Yaolan participants took their everyday troubles to other citizens for support, help, and advice. However, these issue-specific complaints seemed to escalate (throughout the two forums) into strong critique targeting, for example, corruption in the educational system, unequal distribution of school
resources, the lack of welfare support for migrant workers, and, on occasion, hardened resistance against the political system more broadly.

Although many participants engaged in the civic behavior of complaining on the three forums, Tieba and Yaolan participants did not engage in direct contention against the state as much as Qiangguo Luntan participants did. However, they were more involved in other social-civic communicative practices, which emerged during everyday political talk. Advice giving and helping others was much more common among Tieba and Yaolan participants. As Table 7.2 shows, these categories represented 23.2% and 12.8% of Yaolan and Tieba’s posts. It was fairly common for participants here to turn to fellow users for advice or help when they encountered personal childcare problems. They often shared their personal experiences, which pushed personal issues to the public arena, turning them into public issues. That is, as similar experiences accumulated in these threads, participants talked less about personal problems and more about public concerns. Participants worked together to help solve these problems collaboratively and collectively, which seemed to foster civic agency.

This process is illustrated in the following example. In one thread, a Tieba participant (a migrant mother) was expressing her sorrow for leaving her two children behind in her rural hometown. Another participant, then, responded by sharing her own experience of growing up without parents and advised the migrant mother to try her best to live with her children to protect them from suffering psychological harm such distance may cause. A third participant asked the migrant mother about the reasons why she could not take her children to the city (Guangzhou). She replied that there were no childcare services (education and entertainment) available for her children and that she could not take good care of them due to long working hours at the factory. This provoked more posts, where participants shared similar dilemmas that migrant parents face in China today and tried to figure out the best they could do to their children.

Storytelling is a natural form of everyday talk by which people reflect upon their experiences, express values, and consider doing something (Fisher, 1989). As Table 7.2 indicates, storytelling was the most prominent social-civic communicative practice on Tieba and Yaolan, representing 27.0% and 25.8% of their posts respectively. As alluded to above, participants shared their stories about, for example, finding suitable schools for children, domestic violence, and issues around childcare and migrant workers. It allowed citizens to define their lived realities and directly speak for their self-interests. Storytelling too was a reciprocal affair; participants would share, compare, and discuss their stories.
with one another. Such interpersonal communication encouraged citizens to actively articulate their personal experiences. This, along with the atmosphere of support, seemed to help foster mutual understanding among participants and the formation of group consciousness. The expressions of sympathy, good wishes, and social support more broadly – other common reactions storytelling tended to elicit – created a friendly and social atmosphere which fostered the exchange of ideas.

Sometimes sharing stories about childcare issues turned into social talk (or intimate conversations); i.e., talk that has no explicit political meaning, such as chitchat, banter, and greetings. Although such conversations lack the ‘political’ in political talk, they did facilitate social bonding among participants, strengthening their sense of belonging to the online communities. Furthermore, these online social interactions can foster new social networks, bringing people closer together, potentially developing citizens’ social empowerment and civic engagement. For instance, in a thread focusing on domestic violence on Yaolan, a participant introduced a Tencent QQ (another popular social media in China) group chat account for sharing stories and supporting each other. This new social network provided participants with another entry into a variety of activities, including helping, supporting, and other civic activities linked to social associations and institutions.

**Level 3 Emotional expressions**

More than merely talk, participants were also involved in strong expressions of emotion and feelings when discussing childcare and parenting issues. In this section, the passions of citizens were investigated to understand the affective dimension of everyday political talk, attempting to explore the role of emotions in the political process. In addition to the content analysis, a closer reading of the threads was carried out to acquire an in-depth understanding of emotions in political talk.

The level of expressive postings in Qiangguo Luntan was substantially lower compared to the Tieba and Yaolan forums. On Qiangguo Luntan, negative feelings, which included anger, sadness, and fear, were expressed in 14.6% of the sampled postings (see Table 7.3). Anger was the most prominent emotional type, while sadness and fear were less common. Based on a closer reading of the threads, three patterns of anger expression on Qiangguo Luntan were identified. First, anger expression seemed to facilitate the deliberative process. Participants’ expressions of anger about certain childcare and family policies sometimes were used to strengthen their claims. In turn, this seemed to foster and
deepen the reasoning process, further revealing the injustices and negative effects of the policy in question. Meanwhile, the expression of anger also helped strengthen the tone of one's argument, enhancing the chances of being heard.

Second, anger served as an emotional catalyst for social change. The feeling of anger catalyzes citizens' behavior of complaining childcare and family related matters as public issues. Thus, citizens were emotionally empowered to challenge injustices related to child welfare issues, express criticism towards certain policies or authorities and pressure the government to act on matters concerning children’s safety and welfare. Although the action of complaining does not guarantee any consensus between the public grievances and government’s policy changes, the angry sentiments were likely to be heard when they grew strong enough and entered the wider public sphere, in service of the just ends.

Third, anger, sometimes, was expressed as a mode of cynical engagement in citizens’ everyday life. The cynical expression of frustration and anger about the state’s limited progress in improving welfare for children and families was not caused by a single welfare issue. However, citizens’ continued dissatisfaction about the growing gap between their perception about social realities and the socialist ideals that accumulated into a cynical attitude. The neglected and unresolved frustration emerged again in citizens’ everyday talk about childcare and family related issues, involved with the critique about the political system and CCP.

In addition to these patterns of anger expression, Qiangguo Luntan participants used humor as a vehicle for emotional expression, too. As citizens complained and criticized the state’s limited support for childcare services, the inequalities and government bureaucracy in providing these services through satirical humor and irony, humor also functioned as an useful device for citizens to distance themselves from their statement of discontent, facilitating them lightly bringing up a serious social issue from their informal political talk about family issues. Therefore, humor, for citizens, acted as an empowerment tool but also as a method to dilute very strong criticism, softening the confrontation with the state.
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Table 7.3 Emotions expressed across forums (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Qiangguo Luntan (N=616)</th>
<th>Baidu Tieba (N=1128)</th>
<th>Yaolan (N=691)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

The expression of emotions were more prominent on Tieba, representing 17.4% of Tieba postings. Tieba participants tended to express anger, sadness, and fear over more positive feelings (see Table 7.3). Anger was the most popular expressed emotion and it served as a self-empowerment tool. The expression of anger was often embedded in speech acts of storytelling and complaining about their private life difficulties concerning childcare and parenting or everyday experience of oppression from local authority. For instance, a participant expressed his or her strong emotion of anger when he or she was complaining about the lack of chances for children from non-elite families to study at good-quality schools. His feeling of anger and frustration drove him to open up and share his personal experiences that contributed to that feeling of anger, playing a crucial role in transforming the private troubles into public issues. Moreover, the feeling of anger also promoted assertiveness of Tieba participants as they talked and complained about an issue. At the same time, anger also functioned as a “glue”, improving the social bonding among participants. Induced by someone’s anger embedded in his/her experience, other participants also recalled their similar personal experiences. In this way, the interpersonal bonding bridged by the anger emotion provided participants the social basis to bring their private trouble to the wider public, promoting more discussions and chances of changing their personal situation.
With regard to the personal emotions of fear and sadness, though less prominent on *Tieba*, they contributed to the building of a (potential) community. When *Tieba* participants exposed their fear or worry about their children’s safety at schools or the injustices in education system which may deprive their children of chances to go to quality schools, it signaled potential problems for other parents as well. In this way, the shared feeling of fear was helping the bigger community to become aware of these issues. Meanwhile, the collective feeling of fear also increased intimacy and mutual trust among participants in the community. Similarly, citizens became intimate and sympathetic to each other, in their sharing of sad stories. These emotional involvement helped produce trusting, sympathetic and caring relations among participants, which were not only beneficial for mutual exchanges of ideas in the deliberative process but also facilitated individual or group civic behaviors.

Similar to *Qiangguo Luntan*, *Tieba* users, on the one hand, used humor and satire to critique the injustices involved in current childcare and family issues, and on the other hand, attempted to avoid forceful confrontation with the authority via humorous expressions. Moreover, some of the humorous expressions on *Tieba* like joking and banter also contributed to creating a friendly atmosphere.

On *Yaolan*, expressions of emotion were much more prominent than on the other two forums, accounting for 30.3% of postings. In line with *Qiangguo Luntan* and *Tieba*, *Yaolan* participants expressed a lot of negative feelings. Anger and fear were the most common emotions expressed (see Table 7.3). The expression of anger played both positive and negative roles in the political talk on *Yaolan*. On one hand, it served as a tool of personal empowerment. For instance, a woman suffering from domestic abuse expressed her fury in telling her story on *Yaolan*, which attracted a lot of attention from others and motivated many people to provide advice and help for her. In this example, anger was a tool for her to transform her private trouble into the public, encouraging group discussion and collective problem-solving. Meanwhile, anger also worked as a ‘glue’, increasing the closeness of relationship among participants. This occurs, because it’s human nature to listen when someone expresses feelings which make them vulnerable to others (Larsson, 2012). Therefore, anger expression was a channel to invite others to talk about the issue that triggered the feeling of anger, and then contributing to the building of trust and intimacy. On the other hand, anger was, sometimes, expressed in unproductive ways on *Yaolan*. The strong emotion of anger was often evoked by issues such as children trafficking and children’s safety at school which would severely threaten their children’s
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safety. Since the participants were mostly parents on Yaolan, they normally reacted very angrily to issues of this kind and their anger often escalated into a hostile and cynical attitude to the human trafficking criminals who hurt children or abusive teachers, which hampered their ability to think rationally or constructively about what they could ‘do’ with the situation.

In addition to anger, Yaolan participants tended to express fear in their political talk about childcare and parenting issues. Fear was often expressed as a form of latent complaint by Yaolan participants in their sharing worries with others. The latent form of complaining often occurs among close friends and intimate acquaintances. Because of the helping and sharing atmosphere on Yaolan, participants were more willing to share their worries or anxiety with others. According to Marcus and Mackuen (1993), fear or anxiety works as “an alerting system, gaining citizens’ attention and ultimately facilitating their thinking”. Thus, the expression of fear could help Yaolan participants to direct citizens’ focus into the issue that was worrying them. At the same time, sadness was occasionally expressed when participants told stories to others on Yaolan. Different from anger and fear, sadness did not often incite actions. Nevertheless, it played an important role with other emotions to promote sympathy and interpersonal bonds because people were inclined to bond when they sympathized with others’ sad feelings. Finally, on Yaolan, the use of humor was not that popular as on Qiangguo Luntan and Tieba.

7.6 Discussion and Conclusion

This study shows that political talk about mundane issues that emerges across Chinese online forums opens up spaces for citizens to engage in deliberative and civic practices. Discussing issues that relate to people’s everyday lives such as childcare and parenting are not considered controversial by the state upfront. This creates opportunities for political talk to emerge, especially in online forums that are not political per se. We have shown that compared to the authoritarian discursive space with constrained freedom of speech on the government-run forum Qiangguo Luntan, the commercial-lifestyle and the commercial-topical forums Tieba and Yaolan created more open and inclusive spaces for citizens to engage in child welfare politics. Especially communicative forms that are traditionally not considered central to deliberative reasoning, such as complaining, sharing experiences through storytelling, and giving advice, open up opportunities for promoting and sustaining the public life of Chinese citizens, thus enhancing the Chinese public sphere.
On *Qiangguo Luntan* posters rarely raised childcare issues related to their private lives. These were directly discussed as political issues. Although making claims (expressing an opinion) was the dominant communicative form, the level of rationality and reciprocity, two key elements of deliberation, was noticeably low when compared to government sponsored forums in Western countries (see, e.g., Jensen, 2003a; Graham, 2003). This is partly because the goal of the forum is to collect citizens’ opinions about government policies to facilitate authoritarian decision-making rather than to stimulate in-depth discussion among citizens, and partly because the participants had limited freedom in setting the agenda of discussion.

Apart from deliberative reasoning, complaining and questioning emerged as important communicative forms during the course of everyday political talk. These speech acts were often employed by citizens as a method for shaping public discourse and pressuring state agencies to change aspects of child welfare policy. Since these grievances were expressed within the agenda already approved by the state, discussions on *Qiangguo Luntan* mainly contributed to the political objectives of the government. This is in line with Schlæger and Jiang (2014) findings on governmental microblogs in China which suggest that these do not promote any institutional changes within (local) governments, but rather serve as ‘reinforcer of the existing power structure’ (p. 203). Although citizens on *Qiangguo Luntan* were allowed to critically engage with childcare policies, which might even be used in actual policy-making by the state, they were limited to the policies and issues set-out by the government. This means they are disconnected from the real policy-making process.

On *Tieba* and *Yaolan*, our commercial-lifestyle and commercial-topical forums, political talk about childcare issues usually began with discussions about private concerns. During the course of everyday talk, these conversations would turn ‘political’ as participants crossed over from their individual interests to wider public concerns by connecting their family troubles with broader social issues. Here, the finding shows that non-political online spaces facilitate citizens in transforming personal concerns into political acts in China, similar to what Graham et al. (2015, 2016) found in everyday online spaces in Western countries. Compared to *Qiangguo Luntan*, *Tieba* and *Yaolan* participants enjoyed more freedom to raise their own issues. Moreover, in online spaces that are not political by nature, such as *Yaolan*, moderation practices are more open and transparent.
Regarding the deliberativeness of political talk, it was Tieba (the commercial-lifestyle forum), and not the explicitly political nor the seemingly non-political forums, where deliberative practices were overall most common. Although the level of claims made was lower than in Qiangguo Luntan and Yaolan, Tieba participants were more rational and reciprocal. Unlike Qiangguo Luntan and Yaolan participants, Tieba participants, on occasions, engaged in extended debate, though convergence of opinions remained extremely rare.

Social-civic communicative practices such as storytelling and advice giving were important means for citizens to express themselves on Yaolan and Tieba. Yaolan is a topical forum aimed at helping and supporting families regarding childcare and parenting issues. This explains why storytelling and advice giving were more prevalent than deliberative communicative practices. These personal forms of communication seemed to strengthen a sense of community and solidarity, encouraging the learning and internalizing of civic values rooted in everyday life. As citizens were socialized into the political process via these social-civic communicative practices, they became ‘active agents in their own socialization’ (Amnå et al., 2009: 27) rather than remaining passive, waiting to be organized by the state. Thus, these online spaces facilitate civic engagement and create online ‘third spaces’ (Wright, 2012b) where citizens’ patterns of participation capture the informal nature of everyday life. The findings here support the claim that political talk can have positive effects on political participation and civic engagement, no matter whether they were conducted in a deliberative way or not (Wyatt et al., 2000; Pearce and Pearce, 2000).

Building upon these findings, one could conclude that the distinctive goals and characteristics of the forums indeed opened up different types of spaces for citizens to negotiate child welfare issues with state agencies. The government-run political forum mainly functioned as a restrained ‘feedback mechanism’ to the state. Although citizens were allowed to interpret policies with critical and contentious attitudes, the government controlled the deliberation process. Conversely, the commercial-lifestyle and topical forums outside of conventional politics created more open and inclusive spaces for citizens to engage in child welfare politics. Without predefined goals to organize citizens to participate in politics, everyday political talk in such spaces opened up more diverse opportunities for citizens to be self-empowered and self-energized in their lifeworld, thus acquiring civic competence to engage in the political process.
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With both deliberative and civic practices emerging, a vibrant civic space integrated with the informal characteristics of everyday life came into being on *Tieba*. On the Yaolan forum a close community has emerged in which citizens share personal experiences and provide each other with advice about life issues. These conversations occasionally turned political and fostered civic engagement. In the everyday (non-political) spaces, the reason, rule-based deliberation is not the dominant communicative practice, as expected by Habermas (1989). There are political (narrative) acts of complaining and sharing personal concerns grounded in citizens’ lived life experiences, via which people find their ways to discuss what are the matters of common concern surrounding the everyday issues. I argue political talk generates a more grounded model of public discourse in everyday public sphere, which links social issues with the lifeworld and widens the scope of what counts as the political in the formal political sphere in China.

The findings here support Rauchfleisch and Schäfer’s (2015) argument that there are multiple online public spheres existing on the Chinese internet, exhibiting different participatory characteristics. They show that the expression of experiences, incorporation of social-civic norms, and formation of a civic community in the setting of everyday life are essential for the emergence of a well-functioning discursive space in which Chinese citizens can articulate their concerns and political opinions. First, expression of experiences and concerns regarding their everyday life plays an important role in bridging the personal and the political, connecting Chinese citizens to public life. Citizens are more motivated to talk and engage in issues related to their personal concerns, which help them to open up the otherwise closed private life experience, and then subject it to public scrutiny. This was especially true when everyday talk about childcare issues turned political via the communicative practices of complaining and storytelling on *Tieba* and *Yaolan*. The political agency constituted through the political (narrative) act of raising personal experiences into relevant politics empowers citizens for civic engagement and social changes.

Second, citizens’ mundane social-civic communicative practices by applying the values and norms rooted in their lifeworld are important for the emergence of an active public sphere. As Dahlgren (2006) argues, the civic values and civic competence originated from the informal spaces of everyday life provide the cultural origins for overt political participation in the public sphere. The social-civic norms of helping and supporting developed in the Chinese tradition of surviving life difficulties through support networks in the lifeworld shape the forms of discourse in social online spaces. Chinese citizens who
have encountered difficulties regarding childcare and parenting tasks tended to look out for help and support on Tieba and Yaolan.

Third, the formation of a potential online communities and the “civic affinity”, which could blur into civic trust (Dahlgren, 2002), are inherent for a well-functioning public sphere. Chinese citizens’ everyday dialogues, facilitated by the interactivity of BBS forums, tend to be more reciprocal when the forum is more contextualized within social life and less explicitly political. Not being political enthusiasts, users of Tieba and Yaolan frequently engaged in reciprocal exchanges when they were telling stories, giving advice regarding childcare and parenting, as well as, having casual chats. Interpersonal communication played a major role in bounding participants together and linking individual family troubles with public welfare issues at the collective level. Similar to the logic of self-empowerment in the lifeworld addressed above, the key to the formation of connective bonding and social ties are the spirits of sharing, helping, and support when people see others suffer from life difficulties, which are civic norms cultivated in citizens’ (private) everyday life. The informal social connections formed among strangers in the online forums differed from ‘guanxi’ or relation networks, which mainly refers to personal ties that existed within kinship, relative and friend networks Chinese individuals tend to rely on (Pye, 1992). The general civic trust emerged in reciprocal discursive exchanges among strangers on the BBS forums went beyond the specific trust established among familiar people within the guanxi network.

This study has offered an understanding of everyday political talk’s role in facilitating citizen deliberation, increasing civic engagement and steering the political life of Chinese citizens. Compared to the political online space, everyday political talk leads to a more inclusive discursive space via political acts of complaining and sharing personal concerns in non-political spaces. It captures and recognizes the everyday life politics in the private sphere through deliberative or social-civic communication grounded in citizens’ lived experiences. In everyday online spaces, parents’ sharing of their personal experiences and feelings in the political talk about childcare and parenting reduced communicative isolation and supported civic affinity. Moreover, it strengthened citizens’ sense of belonging to a community where their everyday life could be reflected upon, and their life struggles could be articulated.