8. Conclusions

Political talk in the internet-based everyday sphere in China

The extent to which the Chinese internet creates new dynamics of social change has been a central topic of debate over the past two decades. Previous studies have investigated the political implications of the rise of the internet in China mainly from the macro level, focusing on the dynamics between the state and society. However, the microdynamics of technology, politics, and society in the context of everyday life have obtained far less attention. This dissertation contributes to filling this gap by exploring the potential spaces of daily life beyond the formal political sphere in China. More specifically, it focuses on everyday online political talk. This allows us to explore how citizens on a day-to-day basis interact with political issues at the micro-level and how they engage in public deliberation.

Due to the limited possibilities of political participation in formal settings, everyday political talk is a significant alternative channel for Chinese citizens to engage in politics. The internet-based everyday sphere opens up new social spaces where citizens discuss political issues grounded in their views and experiences. Studying online political talk thus serves as an effective approach to empirically examine how loosely organized ordinary citizens engage in the political process. It is both challenging and interesting to study the Chinese internet, which can cultivate liberating power but may also strengthen the existing social and political hierarchies, because of the mix of politics, commercial forces and local culture in China (Chen and Reese, 2015). This study provides new perspectives for understanding the complexity of the dynamics of online politics in China, thus contributing a non-Western lens for viewing and grasping communication, politics, and society.

This dissertation showed how politics emerges from everyday talk about various personal matters and lifestyle issues such as concerns about the environment, seeing doctors at hospitals, buying medicine, and child-rearing. I conducted a comparative analysis of political talk on three forums that have different styles, aims, and affordances. They range from an explicitly political forum to a forum where the mixing of politics with lifestyle and private matters occurs, to a non-political forum. This enabled me to study the nature of citizen interactions in the spaces of everyday life without an explicitly political focus (Tieba and Yaolan) and compare this with political talk in the space of conventional politics (Qiangguo Luntan). The comparison showed that deliberative political talk was
uncommon on the political forum. It was on the mixed forum, where political talk was the most deliberative. Furthermore, closely related to deliberative ideals, a variety of civic engagement activities, such as complaining and storytelling, emerged during citizens’ mundane communicative practices. This, I argue, transforms participants from lay people into engaged citizens, connecting the personal to the political, especially in non-political spaces.

8.1 Research findings

This study examined the nature of online political talk across three popular forums by addressing three central research questions, which have been discussed in the empirical Chapters 5-7. The first research question (RQ1) asked to what extent everyday political talk in Chinese digital spaces meets the normative conditions of deliberation. This RQ investigates the deliberativeness of political talk. The second research question (RQ2) focused on other communication forms such as social-civic communicative practices (RQ2a) and emotional expressions (RQ2b). The third research question (RQ3) asked if the different forums’ styles, aims, and affordances had an impact on discursive practices.

8.1.1 The deliberative process

The results of the empirical study showed that participants were more capable of influencing the agenda of political discussions on non-political forums (Tieba and Yaolan) than on the explicitly political forum (Qiangguo Luntan). Citizens had more freedom here to engage in political talk that was rooted in their personal experiences without being curbed by the clear political orientation of the political space. It showed that the variable of topic does not impact the nature of the political talk that much because similar results were found in every case study. It was the difference between forums that mattered most.

To explore the functions of citizens’ everyday political talk, this dissertation first analyzed the level of deliberativeness. The process of deliberation was examined through the lenses of public sphere theory and deliberative democracy. To conduct good deliberation, citizens are required to have well-considered and rational-critical conversations. Meanwhile, it is important that participants respectfully listen and respond to others’ statements. In this study, the norms of deliberation were operationalized for empirical analysis based on the following criteria: rationality, continuity, reciprocity, sincerity, and discursive equality. In this chapter, I will present the findings of the empirical analysis of political talk per topic (see Figures 8.1 – 8.3). I then highlight the
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criteria of rational-critical debate – the level of rationality, reciprocity, and continuity of debate – in reporting the comparative results.

**Figure 8.1** Comparative analysis of the deliberativeness of political talk about environmental issues

![Comparative analysis of the deliberativeness of political talk about environmental issues](image1)

**Figure 8.2** Comparative analysis of the deliberativeness of political talk about public health issues

![Comparative analysis of the deliberativeness of political talk about public health issues](image2)
Figure 8.3 Comparative analysis of the deliberativeness of political talk about childcare and parenting issues

The analysis showed that Qiangguo Luntan users expressed their ideas more frequently than users from the other forums. They also justified their claims by supporting them with arguments more often, although on most occasions they still did not substantiate them. The goal of Qiangguo Luntan is to collect public support for the policy agenda of the government rather than create space for citizens to discuss issues via the give and take of reasons. Similar to Qiangguo Luntan users, Tieba users expressed opinions often but not always backed their ideas with reasoning. However, their level of rationality assessed by the percentage of reasoned claims among all the claims made was higher than that of Qiangguo Luntan participants. Yaolan users exchange opinions less frequently, and it was rare to find them argue by the use of reason. It seems that the lack of explicit connections with political issues on the forum prohibited them from positing about politics and engaging in debate.

When we take reciprocity into account, another story emerges. As the forums became less political and more social, everyday talk about the three topics tended to be more reciprocal and interactive. Participants exchanged opinions and continued the debate most often on Baidu Tieba. The continuity of political debates was lower on Qiangguo Luntan and lowest on Yaolan. Yaolan participants were closely interconnected but not via the form of rational-critical debate. Qiangguo Luntan participants tended to make loose assertions frequently, but they did not often respond to others’ views to engage
in critical debates. Although the Chinese government opened up some official spaces online for public discourse, participants were led to engage in a consultative process, not a deliberative process. The nature of the government-led Qiangguo Luntan thus had a strong influence in shaping the users’ communicative patterns.

The comparison between the forums showed that the topic of political talk (the environment, public health, and childcare and parenting) did not fundamentally impact the nature of the deliberation on a forum. However, there were slight differences regarding the indicator of continuity. Specifically, the topic had an impact on the frequency of continued debate on Tieba. This emerged more often when people were talking about public health issues than when they discussed the environment and childcare and parenting. Public health was one of the most controversial issues in China, as it concerned the well-being of every Chinese citizen, the investment from the government, and the interest of hospitals and other sectors. The controversial topic stimulated disagreements among participants. It seems that the argumentative exchanges on Tieba went deeper when the issue participants talked about was more controversial.

The results show that the characteristics of a forum and its capacity of affording communicative practices that bridge the public and the private jointly determined the deliberative quality of political talk. The effective link between personal experiences and matters of common concern – “issues the public ought to discuss” (Mansbridge, 1999) – paved the way for the emergence of a social space in which proper deliberation can occur. Participants were more active in exchanging opinions and negotiating different ideas when their personal experiences could be incorporated into the agenda of discussion and could be transformed in such a way that the private matters were understood as public issues.

Tieba which combines a public space with a lifestyle focus offered the best chance for citizens to translate self-experiences and personal considerations into public concerns. Citizens on Tieba were enabled to develop an opinion and consider diverse views rather than merely express one’s individual directional preferences. In contrast to the open agenda and the possibilities to bring personal concerns into the public on Tieba, Qiangguo Luntan did not support the connection between the public and the private by constraining the agenda of political talk in compliance with the political agenda of the government. Under the control of government agencies, Qiangguo Luntan did not really facilitate citizen deliberation but treated citizens as objects of persuasion. Posting only isolated comments and opinions geared towards officials, citizens were not engaged in deliberative exchanges. The simple aggregation of loose assertions and opinions withheld citizens from
effectively practicing their deliberative capacity, learning diverse views, and becoming empowered citizens. Without a clear political context, the agenda of discussion was open to citizens’ articulation of personal concerns and desires on Yaolan. Personal considerations of everyday issues were linked with the common good concerning the wider society via diverse personal forms of communication, rather than political debate, on this topical forum.

8.1.2 Social-civic communicative practices

To answer the second research question (RQ2a), other communicative forms that promote social-civic practices were examined. Everyday political talk in Chinese digital spaces gave rise to multiple communicative forms beyond the framework of deliberation, which serve as alternative channels to foster political engagement. Figures 8.4 — 8.6 show the comparative analysis of social-civic forms of communication used per topic.

Figure 8.4: Comparative analysis of social-civic forms of communication in political talk about environmental issues

![Figure 8.4: Comparative analysis of social-civic forms of communication in political talk about environmental issues](image)

Figure 8.5: Comparative analysis of social-civic forms of communication in political talk about public health issues

![Figure 8.5: Comparative analysis of social-civic forms of communication in political talk about public health issues](image)
As a popular communicative form in people’s daily life, the speech act of complaining was a prominent mode of social-civic behavior on the three forums. It is a particular type of everyday act that convey citizens’ dissent about public affairs towards the government, striving for social change. Complaining happened most frequently on Qiangguo Luntan, less frequently on Tieba and the least on Yaolan. It was mixed with rational arguments and assertions on both Qiangguo Luntan and Tieba, but not on Yaolan where citizens were not very engaged in political deliberation.

A closer qualitative analysis of political talk showed that Qiangguo Luntan participants complained about the environment, public health, and childcare and parenting issues as public policy issues, directly targeting official agencies for better policy-making. These policy-specific complaints could become hardened criticism against...
relevant policies, the government, and the political system in general. However, these complaints were often softened by citizens’ (ironic) use of nationalist discourse and humorous expressions. On *Tieba* and *Yaolan*, in contrast, participants usually raised issue-specific complaints based on their personal experiences in their everyday life. *Tieba* participants mostly sought help or suggestions from the wider society but they sometimes also expressed very radical complaints about policies and the government. On *Yaolan*, the non-political forum, complaints mostly remained issue-specific and personal. There was less subversive criticism voiced towards the government than on *Qiangguo Luntan* and *Tieba*.

The findings here show different characteristics when it comes to political talk about environmental issues. The complaints on *Tieba* and *Yaolan*, not only expressed citizens’ discontent about environmental problems they encountered in everyday life but also involved a great deal of policy-oriented criticism. This indicates how the political emerged from everyday conversations and how complaints about a certain issue were not only influenced by the forum style but also shaped by the specific topic of online discussions. Environmental problems that have a major impact on individuals’ health and ways of life have already been politicized as social issues in China due to the deterioration of the environment. That is why citizens sometimes talked about environmental issues as political issues even in the spaces of everyday life.

In addition to the contentious act of complaining, other social-civic engagement activities such as storytelling, advice giving, and social talk also emerged in the online political talk about the three topics. These individual communicative practices contribute little to processes of persuasion or reasoned exchange of differences that are required in the deliberative process. However, they do provide citizens with a lower threshold to express political preferences based on personal experiences and self-interest. Through these social-civic processes, citizens render everyday issues visible in the broader public realm, practice their everyday citizenship, and form informal social connections. The personal communicative forms of storytelling and advice giving/helping were frequently practiced by *Tieba* and *Yaolan* participants, with *Qiangguo Luntan* as an exception. Storytelling and advice giving/helping occurred more frequently on *Yaolan* than *Tieba*. *Yaolan*, as a non-political forum, created a space for citizens to share everyday life issues with others, seeking help and providing support to each other. The topic did not have a major impact on the frequency of storytelling and advice giving on *Yaolan*, but it did on *Tieba*. *Tieba* participants employed the communicative form of storytelling and advice giving/helping very often in political talk about public health and childcare and parenting.
issues. This can be explained by the close connections that public health and childcare and parenting issues share with everyday life matters than environmental issues.

8.1.3 The expression of emotions

To answer the research question about the affective dimension of political talk (RQ2b), the expression of emotions was investigated. This allows us to explore the affective power of online talk and the dynamics between rational debate and emotions. Participants of the three forums mostly expressed negative emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness. Occasionally they used humorous expressions.

The results show that on Qiangguo Luntan and Tieba anger was the most prominent type of emotion expressed when discussing environmental issues. On the latter forum, citizens expressed the strongest feeling of anger and paired this with opinion expressions, mostly in response to the government’s ineffectiveness in dealing with environmental problems and the implementation of policy. Since environmental issues are already on the policy agenda of the government, political talk about it did not promote strong feelings of anger on Qiangguo Luntan, which partly functioned as a governmental forum collecting public support for policy-making. On Tieba, however, users expressed much anger when they discussed how environmental issues impacted their personal life. Their day-to-day experiences with severe pollution and other environmental issues caused by factories motivated citizens to strongly criticize the ineffectiveness of environmental policies. Unlike Tieba, Yaolan participants expressed feelings of anger far less, but instead they expressed worries about the health impact on their children. Because the Yaolan forum aims to help parents with taking care of children, the agenda of environmental talk was more oriented to the protection of children from pollution and what families could do themselves to protect the environment.
Figure 8.7 Comparative analysis of emotions expressed in political talk about environmental issues

Figure 8.8 Comparative analysis of emotions expressed in political talk about public health issues

Figure 8.9 Comparative analysis of emotions expressed in political talk about childcare & parenting issues
During political talk about public health issues, as well as childcare and parenting issues (see Figures 8.8 and 8.9), anger was expressed prominently on all three forums. As these issues are very closely connected to citizens’ everyday life, the affective dimension of political talk was strong, even on Yaolan. On Qiangguo Luntan, anger was a catalyst of criticism against certain policies and often expressed when different ideas and disagreements were exchanged, leading to deliberative practices. On Yaolan, the expression of anger mainly served as a tool of personal empowerment, facilitating the expression of personal concerns rooted in citizens’ everyday life context and transforming them into public issues. On Tieba, the expression of anger was embedded within both the social-civic process and deliberative moments.

In addition to anger, participants also expressed less politically subversive feelings like fear and sadness. These were more frequently expressed on Tieba and Yaolan, and very rarely on Qiangguo Luntan. The emotive expression of fear and sadness was not to directly resist against injustices citizens encounter, but to express implicit complaints as an almost hidden form of resistance. Meanwhile, sharing these emotions often provoked sympathy from others, creating social bonds among participants.

Finally, humor was used differently on the forums. Qiangguo Luntan participants used satire to mock and criticize government performance and their policies but also employed humorous expressions to soften their critique of the state. Different from Qiangguo Luntan users’ strategic and flexible use of humor in their expression of political contention, Tieba and Yaolan users mostly employed humorous expressions such as joking.
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and banter to create a funny, entertaining, and friendly atmosphere, which seemed to promote a sense of community among participants.

8.2 Theoretical implications

To figure out the subtlety of Chinese practices of deliberation, the social structure of deliberation which is rooted in forum-specific circumstances and the larger socio-cultural context, should not be taken for granted. As Rosenberg (2004) suggests, the quality of communication is influenced by the social structure in which communicative practices are constructed, and in turn, these also shape the social context. In his view, deliberation cannot be simplified as a process of free and equal exchange of opinions. Instead, it has a structure which considers the social aspects of communication such as emotional engagement, the dynamics of communicative exchanges, identity, and community building. Everyday talk as an important part of civic culture that anchors emotions, values, civic trust, affinities, and identities, plays a big role in generating the social structure of communication. The approach to study deliberation in the networks of everyday political talk is, therefore, a good way to reveal how the social structure emerged in the course of everyday communication in Chinese digital spaces realized the ideals of deliberation.

Rosenberg has emphasized that different social contexts and structural settings construct different forms of communication and encourage different forms of rationality. “Insofar as social environments are structured differently, they create different forms of ‘social co-operation’ and thereby lead individuals to ‘operate’ and thus reason in fundamentally different ways” (Rosenberg, 2004, p.13). The structure of communicative spaces and communities can facilitate or limit certain communicative practices which promote new forms of reasoning and understanding. This research shows that this is especially true with regard to political talk in Chinese cyberspace. The different structures of communication formed on the three different forums shape the nature of political talk differently.

8.2.1 Government-run online political space: authoritarian deliberation

Qiangguo Luntan was established by the state governed news website People’s Net as a political forum for citizens to talk about policies, environmental problems, social welfare, and issues involving social equality. On the forum, the environment, public health, and childcare and parenting were directly discussed as political issues. Barber (1984) stresses, it is talk itself that should maintain its function of agenda-setting in a healthy democracy.
However, the agenda of political talk was mostly determined by forum staff who both moderated and censored political discussions according to strict pre-moderation rules. *Qiangguo Luntan* did not open up opportunities for participants to put other issues they wanted to raise on the agenda. It meant that mundane political talk on the political forum was decontextualized from citizens’ everyday life realities, consequently losing the potentials of empowering everyday citizens. These seemingly soft forms of social control constrained the freedom of *Qiangguo Luntan* participants in articulating the problems they encounter in everyday life and expressing their self-interest and true political wills, which in the end discouraged citizens to talk, deliberate, and engage in the political process via the forum. They consequently manipulated the process and outcome of political deliberation.

Although the government severely influenced the deliberative process via agenda-setting, information control, and the forum structure, users figured out alternative forms of civic participation on *Qiangguo Luntan*. A certain amount of public dissent was displayed on the governmental forum through the speech acts of complaining and questioning, the expression of anger, and the use of satire and irony. However, the resistance against relevant environmental policies and social inequalities involved in public health and child welfare policies was much weaker than the type of popular resistance in Western countries, which is normally characterized by direct opposition against any form of power domination, including the highest authority of the state. The contestation evolving from political talk on *Qiangguo Luntan* did not support confrontation with the state or the central government’s rule; they were mostly softened by nationalist discourse or humorous speech acts when it involved strong criticism against the state.

Based on the normative assessment of deliberation as well as the analysis of other social-civic communicative practices, the nature of political talk enabled by the governmental forum differed quite substantially from the ideals of Western deliberation. Rather than empowering citizens by giving them a say in decision-making, deliberation aimed to enhance the governance of the state. This was given priority above holding authorities accountable to public opinion as envisioned in Habermas’s ideals of the public sphere. This was termed as “authoritarian deliberation” (He and Warren, 2011). The goal is to enhance the rule of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) and to avoid the direct challenge of the legitimacy of its authority. As the results show, the authoritarian environment and the structure of the forum constructed under the leadership of the
government shape the forms of communication on the forum. Political talk here became consultation of the people, controlling the public discourse in this political space. Consequently, the allowed political expression on Qiangguo Luntan could be accommodated into policy-making to win more legitimacy for the government but without effectively empowering Chinese citizens. The governmental forum reinforces the current distribution of power and interests, maintaining politics as usual in the socio-political context of China. This confirms previous research on Chinese e-government programs (Schlæger and Jiang, 2014; Jiang, 2009; Damn, 2003).

8.2.2 Online spaces outside of the realm of conventional politics: a transition to democratic deliberation and a new political society?

Most theories of formal deliberation privilege a narrow idea of public interest and the common good in which personal experiences and private interests are excluded and discredited (Young, 1990; Sanders, 1997). Other political theorists argue, however, that self-interest rooted in private concerns does (need to) have an important role in deliberation and strong democracy (Mansbridge, 2010; Young, 1996; Barber, 1984). This study has shown that the expression of personal experiences and interests can bridge the private and the public in the agenda of online political talk. In the casual political conversations among everyday citizens, the expression of troubles and difficulties that citizens encountered in their everyday life fostered deliberative exchanges.

On Tieba and Yaolan, the forums without a clear political focus, users discussed how they struggled with environmental, public health, and childcare and parenting issues. By talking about their personal experiences, in relation to the topic, citizens had the opportunity to include what was important in their everyday life in the agenda of political talk. This is important because it is crucial to include the interests of those whose lives have been impacted by certain issues in the process of deliberation. Mansbridge (2010), for example, argues that the exploration and clarification of private interests can prevent the politically powerful from dominating the construction of the common good, even when they do not intend to manipulate the process of deliberation. Moreover, Fung (2003) argues that the articulation of self-interests promotes better deliberation because “participants will invest more of their psychic energy and resources into the process and so make it more thorough and creative” (p.345). Particularly on Tieba, political talk about the three topics accommodated participants’ personal concerns, embraced the expression of individual views, which actually encouraged vigorous rational-critical debate. As Tieba is a commercial-lifestyle forum, it facilitated the development of lifestyle (identity) politics.
and a subculture oriented around commercialism. Young people consider it as a place for entertain, as well as a place to express themselves. On this forum, participants were encouraged to claim their individual rights and interests, express their perspectives and views in the liberal sense. Because of participants’ strong personal concerns and values, it was common for disputes and different points of view to emerge on Tieba, generating deliberative exchanges among participants.

On Yaolan, in contrast, self-expression of particular experiences and interests did not result in rational-critical debate as frequently. The findings revealed that rational arguments were rare, even though Yaolan users regularly talked about what was really at stake in their daily life and stood up for their personal concerns. The question then is why did a deliberative process not emerge out of the articulation of personal experiences and private interest on Yaolan? A closer analysis revealed that the self-expression of personal experiences and interests did not lead to value conflicts among Yaolan participants. Instead, they were more willing to help, listen, and talk about the issues aligned with the shared concerns of others. Yaolan participants were mostly parents who joined the online conversation for personal aims but did not care that much about how this relates to public policies. They merely discussed personal concerns, such as whether to buy school-zone houses for their children's education, worries about children vaccine safety, and hidden dissent about environmental pollution. However, the expressions of personal concerns and interests was not considered as confrontational by others. As the collective aim of the forum was to help and support people to solve everyday life problems, participants were very open to the concerns of others and appeal to the collective interest shared by participants.

He (2014) argues in his work about deliberative culture and politics in China, that communitarian norms rooted in the neo-Confucian culture advocate “combined and balanced interests” between the private and the public during public discussions (p.64). Citizens are not expected here to pursue their ultimate individual interests, unlike in the Western liberal traditions where individuals are encouraged to compete for their interests. Personal concerns and views were often expressed, in line with the shared interest or values on the Yaolan forum. The ways people interacted with each other in the Yaolan community were impacted by the communitarian norms developed on the basis of traditional Confucian values. They did not fit into the liberal traditions, which encourage individuals to stand up for their own interests. This indicates the Western style of deliberation is not a proper way to listen and respond to the personal concerns and
particular interests of everyday citizens in the close (interpersonal) communities formed on *Yaolan*. The following part of the Chapter will illustrate how *Yaolan* participants retreated from the deliberative norms, while managed to express their particular complaints and interests via other communicative forms, succeeding in the articulation of differences.

In addition to the normative analysis of deliberative practices, this study pays attention to social-civic forms of communication in everyday online spaces. It thus explores the dynamics between social-civic process and deliberative process on both *Tieba* and *Yaolan*. Except arguing and debating, citizens were also involved in communicative practices such as complaining, storytelling, advice giving/helping, social talk and emotional expressions as social agents. These social-civic communicative practices not only offered alternative ways to bring issues to the conversation but also created a social structure which situates communicative acts in a particular socio-civic context. The deliberative effect of communicative action is determined by the specific social-cultural context it is embedded in, rather than by the act of exchanging views itself (Sass and Dryzek, 2014). The different social-cultural context facilitated citizens’ talk and debate via a different package of communicative forms.

*The multiple social-civic communicative practices emerging in citizens’ everyday living environment enabled the expression of differences in the public arena, extending the elite-dominated public sphere to the grassroots level in China.* At present, a large number of under-organized ordinary citizens do not have formal access to politics, nor are they agents of the elitist civil society, which shares a cooperative relationship with the state. Their everyday life struggles are not taken seriously in the emergent Chinese public sphere, which is more oriented to the liberal-civil ideals popular with the middle-upper class in China. Thus, it ignores the appeals of the lower class. For a large population of non-elite and ordinary citizens, the internet is an accessible channel for political expression and participation. As the results showed, the civic agencies involved in online communicative acts, such as complaining, storytelling, advice giving/helping, social talk, and emotional expressions, played an important role in linking the injustices in citizens’ personal life experiences to political issues, accommodating the desires of everyday citizens into the agenda of discussion. The communicative capacity in participants’ social-civic practices was nurtured by the communicative traditions, habitual norms, and cultural values originating from Chinese citizens’ mundane practices in their social lives.
These personalized communicative forms facilitating the expression of personal desires, grievances, and feelings do not demand the involvement of rational-critical debate and persuasion in bringing personal claims to the public agenda on a specific issue. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), personalized communicative practices open to diverse personal forms of reasoning can preserve some space for ordinary citizens to articulate their particular experiences and concerns. In this study, we saw those forms of self-expression via storytelling, asking or giving advice/help, complaints, satire, and emotions on Tieba and Yaolan. They served as new communicative strategies to frame social reality and transform personal troubles into public issues, challenging the hierarchies in the emphasis of universal rationality. The multiple social-civic communicative forms, beyond the framework of deliberation, empowered citizens to create communicative space for discussing their life experiences and reflecting on the unequal power structure in the public realm, which led to more productive disagreements and, in the end, promoted equality and empowerment, the ultimate end of deliberative ideals. This study suggests, being inclusive of alternative forms of communication emerging from the real-life context, the talk-centric everyday online sphere could account for the popular political struggles happening within Chinese citizens' everyday life realities, accommodating the political wills of subalterns into the Chinese public sphere.

Political talk in non-political online spaces provides a site for the construction and transformation of citizenship, overcoming the ideological fragmentations that increasingly polarize Chinese society nowadays. As revealed in the study, citizens talked about certain issues or did something mostly out of their personal concerns in everyday (non-political) spaces, not for political aims, such as promoting grand political ideals of freedom and democracy in China. Being non-political, the Tieba and Yaolan forums were inclusive of issues that are linked with private matters or lifestyle values, which entails more personal expressions (coded as the social-civic communicative practices in the study). Through those personal forms of communication, everyday citizens talked about public issues out of self-concerns/interest or self-related norms and values rather than on the basis of deliberative citizenship or priori-given civic identity. By talking politics via the diverse forms of personal expression, participants got the entry ticket to the construction of citizenship, in which their sense of civic self is fluid rather than fixed. The personal behaviors on Tieba and Yaolan (storytelling, providing help and advice, complaining, interpersonal conversation, emotions) produced serial civic groups in latent forms. They were open to stronger forms of participation but also the possible retreat from the temporary social-civic activities, different from the organized political actions based on
strong group identity. As pointed out by Bennett and Segerberg (2012), people’s political identification is not based on their common group membership or their same ideological orientation in the personalized actions that are connected with everyday politics.

In the current Chinese political life, the ideological fragmentation between “leftist-Confucian” and “Western-liberal” has become more apparent than any ideological tensions since the 1989 democracy movement in Beijing (Zhang, 2016). The trend of ideological division also appeared in Chinese cyberspace, shaping the online political discussions, from major political disputes concerning national interests to specific societal events or scandals (Pan and Xu, 2015). However, shifting the attention to the potential spaces of everyday life, this study found ordinary Chinese citizens were mostly expressing their personal concerns/interest or telling stories about their personal experiences about a specific issue rather than making empty ideological debates. This dissertation suggests citizens’ political engagement via everyday political talk in the non-political online spaces were able to avoid influences from the reviving ideological divisions in current Chinese socio-political landscape, facilitating the achievement of mutual understanding and citizen empowerment. Of course, it is still not possible to completely prevent the ideological divide as new values and diverse norms are emerging from Chinese people’s way of thinking at the phase of societal transformation. What’s important here is the fact that everyday political talk creates a space for people to not simply to throw away their pre-formed political orientations but to express ideas by using their everyday life experiences as a valid source of politics. In the everyday spaces, participants sharing the same cultural and social lifeworld are more able to have a common understanding of how things are, rather than disagree just for the sake of disagreeing due to ideological conflicts.

Through participating in the political talk on the non-political online forums, a sense of community among citizens, in the minimal sense, was built. The highly reciprocal and interactive conversations on Tieba and Yaolan served as a good way for citizens to create mutual trust and explore the daily structure of common life. On the two non-political forums, Chinese citizens were frequently involved in the activity of sharing personal experiences with each other and giving advice to those in trouble, generating civic trust and social bonds. These activities went against the reasoning and debating culture or the manifest resistant spirit towards the domination of power but originated from the cultural traditions of networking in their everyday life. In Chinese society, people tend to deal with their life troubles by turning to informal social relations, forming self-help groups and providing mutual support, influenced by the cultural norms of collectivism. The
connective bonding and social ties appearing in the course of political talk on the two forums arose out of the helping and supporting culture nurtured in the unofficial lifeworld.

Meanwhile, the affective dimensions of political talk also played a role in building a potential online community. By communicating their personal stories and sharing one’s emotions, such as sadness, fear, and anger with others in political talk, participants became familiar and intimate with one another. Emotions tended to be less appreciated in formal deliberation, but they were not to be denied, especially in citizens’ practice of everyday political talk. Sharing emotions with others often generate a sympathetic and caring atmosphere, forming strong social bonds. Sympathy is not only a key element to motivate people to get to know and understand others, listen to their stories, and respect their views, which deliberative exchanges depend upon (Rosenberg, 2004). It also has a political function; that is, to facilitate the establishment of a community transcending the networks of acquaintances. Citizens were transformed into members of a loose civic community of strangers by sympathy and common concern, different from ‘Guanxi’, the personal ties among kin, friends, and acquaintances, which constitute the social network in Chinese society. The civic ties here were weak ties formed on the basis of (artificial) friendship developed among strangers who were bonded by a sympathetic attitude toward each other and their collaborative participation in the search for problem solutions. The civic bond went beyond the social networks aiming to obtain social resources for private interest. Everyday online political talk in non-political spaces created a new form of community in Chinese society, which connected strangers in an artificial space of civic consciousness, practicing the dynamics of citizenship. It is argued that, grounded on (artificial) bonds and civic affinity, an active social-civic space was enabled where ordinary Chinese citizens can talk about their life struggles, express feelings of discontents, and transform their personal experiences into public discussion.

8.3 Final conclusion

Jiang (2010) has emphasized the diversity of online spaces for public discussion in China. She thus challenges the unitary vision in which the Chinese internet is considered a censored and controlled arena. Her center-periphery model of authoritarian deliberation taking place on the Chinese internet demonstrates the existing dialectics of control and participation, and the interplay between state and society at the macro-level. However, it does inadequately address citizens’ online practices in the context of everyday life, which do not necessarily involve the state. By shifting the attention to the potential spaces of everyday life, which engage ordinary Chinese citizens in politics, this research emphasized
the multiplicity of Chinese cyberspace and showed a more nuanced picture of the dynamics of politics, culture, and technology at the micro-level.

Political talk on the three forums showed different forms of communication and ways of engaging in the political process. Although a certain level of political discussion and contentious participation was afforded on the government-sponsored *Qiangguo Luntan*, the forum did not empower citizens. Moreover, it even eroded their civic agency by constraining the agenda-setting function of political talk and limiting citizens’ capacity in bringing issues they really care about onto the political agenda. It effectively, decontextualized political talk from citizens’ everyday life realities. The politicized discussions that were allowed on the forum were to achieve input and support for authoritarian policy-making. This form of authoritarian deliberation permitted on *Qiangguo Luntan*, marrying power and technology, enhanced the authorities and power-elite. The already constrained space citizens had to discuss public issues was often reduced to a forum for consultation without a substantial exchange of claims and reasons. Considering the limited participatory potentials created by political talk on *Qiangguo Luntan*, this study suggests that this forum continued the Maoist model of consultation, although limited deliberation was promoted to improve the government’s ability of dealing with social conflicts. However, the consultations were merely aimed at collecting information from the public rather than at fostering deliberative exchanges.

Different from the government-supported forum, political talk on *Tieba* showed new participatory potentials. A more inclusive space of deliberation with more reasoned communicative exchanges has taken shape on this forum that mixes politics with daily life issues. Citizens, including the subalterns, were motivated to join political talk on *Tieba*. They incorporated affective participation and social-civic engagement, nurtured in their life experiences, daily culture, beliefs, and values, into their communicative practices. The multiplicity of communicative forms and the dynamic interplay between deliberative practices and civic activities created a space which facilitated a constructive process of deliberation and citizen empowerment. With the reduced coercion upon agenda-setting, ordinary citizens’ political struggles in everyday life can be brought to public discussion. Because of the openness and inclusiveness of *Tieba*, more deliberative exchanges emerged in the course of political talk.

What’s more, it is noteworthy that an alternative space of autonomy was arising from the unofficial lifeworld of Chinese society. Through a series of personal actions, the life experiences and personal perspectives were transformed into the bottom-up sources
of politics on Tieba, opening up an everyday space for the autonomous social forces to take part in daily politics. The relatively autonomous space offered ordinary Chinese citizens chances to empower themselves from the bottom up, practice civic identity, and form civic bonds. Here, the relatively autonomous social space does not equal the political entity of the autonomous public sphere in the Western sense, where citizens argue and debate to produce consensus to hold the state power accountable. On this commercial-lifestyle forum, deliberation has the space and inclusiveness to generate influence, and meanwhile, citizens got chances to empower themselves. Although deliberation on Tieba is still controlled by the government via strategies of censorship, the study shows it also enabled citizens to empower themselves, which is the ultimate goal of (Western) democratic deliberation.

Among the three forums, Yaolan was the most inactive platform in engaging participants in deliberative dialogue and in-depth discussion. Yaolan participants did not develop enough deliberative capacity when joining political talk on the forum. They were encouraged to align their values and concerns with the shared values and collective interest rather than challenging the perspectives of others. It seemed that the deliberative ideals had not been smoothly absorbed into the social-cultural context of the personal community, operating according to the (Confucian) communitarian norms of interaction.

However, the everyday communicative practices on Yaolan opened up an alternative space, away from the center of politics, where citizens could render their hidden and privately felt discontents about their daily life visible. This online space with citizens’ unofficial lifeworld as an indispensable zone of social formations operated according to its own logic based on the everyday ethics and folk customs. It created a new political space in China outside the domains of civil society and the state, open to subaltern people to articulate their concerns and interest. Being excluded from the process of both the state and civil society, a certain degree of autonomy was obtained. Moreover, not focusing on issues at the center of politics, this new site of social transformation went beyond the political agenda from the state and also avoided ideological debates between liberal-civilists and the leftists. Being away from and transcending conventional politics, the Yaolan forum provided ordinary Chinese citizens a social context where they could collaborate to figure out problem solutions, explore subjectivity grounded on everybody’s life reality, and practice self-governance without the involvement of political forces.

In the new political realm, citizens did not necessarily have an opposing relation with the state. Instead, this resembles the pastoral social relations between the state and
ordinary people in traditional Chinese politics. As shown in the study, Yaolan participants mostly employed latent forms of discontent expressions without directly confronting the government. Although a new political space was emerging in the bridging sphere between the private and the public, those latent forms of civic engagement needed to be linked with stronger forms of democracy to effectively represent ordinary citizens’ pre-political stage of life in the public sphere.

As the conclusion indicates, political talk on the government-sponsored political forum was constrained within the agenda controlled by the government. It contributes to the politics as usual, maintaining the existing power structure in China. However, moving away from the center of politics, the mixed forum and the non-political forum, were more inclusive in terms of the forms of communication that were used and more open to the expression of differences. They showed potentials in developing an everyday sphere from the bottom-up, addressing the injustices and discontents felt by ordinary citizens in their everyday life. This new political realm that emerges from mundane communicative practices in the informal everyday sphere is necessary in China. It responds to the political wishes and desires of poorly organized ordinary citizens, which often get marginalized in the party-dominated civil society and formal politics.

8.4 Limitations

Although this research has brought new insights on public deliberation and civic engagement in the socio-cultural context of Chinese cyberspace, there are still questions that remain incompletely addressed. Much effort has been made in the research to explore the historical, cultural, and political background of Chinese citizens’ mundane communicative practices, but the contextual reality of Chinese citizens’ communicative practices still needs to be better defined. Since the opening up policy, Chinese society has become more and more fragmented as a result of a series of social changes in the modernization process. It is very misleading to understand Chinese society as a coherent and unitary entity because different parts of China are not at the same level of social development. The social forces emerging from different contexts and backgrounds bear different values, cultural norms, and historical traditions. Therefore, a more detailed articulation of the contextual indicators remains to be conducted by taking into account the social-cultural, political, and historical environments of specific groups of actors in specific online contexts.
While this study has covered a conventional political space, a space mixing politics with lifestyle and private matters, and a non-political space, as well as three issues, more research could be done to have a more comprehensive understanding of how deliberative and civic norms fit into the different lifeworlds of citizens. First, future research should study political talk among more diverse types of publics, such as farmers in villages, migrant workers, everyday consumers, religious citizens, fans of popular culture, and so on. Second, more types of online platforms should be explored, especially platforms that are not explicitly political. This would provide us with more knowledge about how platform designs and technological affordances influence the democratic potential of everyday political talk on the Chinese internet.

Another limitation of the research is related to methodology. By doing content analysis of postings, it was possible to assess the nature of citizens’ political talk and to analyze what communicative forms participants applied to discuss an issue and link it to politics. However, content analysis is not the most suitable method to evaluate indicators such as reflexivity and sincerity because they involve cognitive and affective psychological processes. Mixed methods research that combines content analysis with interviews, experiments, or surveys may help to overcome this problem. Through these methods, the researcher can study psychological processes and transformations in the attitudes of participants, gauge their experiences of talking politics in online forums, and understand their expectations and motivations in everyday online political talk.

The third limitation concerns missing data. Because of the editing practices or moderation rules of the forums, some thread URLs became unretrievable when the researcher went back to check and analyze postings. This happened on both the Tieba and Yaolan forums. It is possible that a discussion thread touched upon sensitive political issues as it went on and was removed by the forum moderators in accordance with censorship rules. This is a complicated problem beyond the researcher’s control. But, if possible, it would be interesting to research the censored data to get a glimpse of how sensitive political talk emerges in citizens’ everyday conversations.

8.5 Societal impact

This dissertation examined everyday political talk on the Chinese internet, exploring its potential for extending the public sphere in China. What does political talk in the internet-based everyday sphere mean for politics in contemporary China? The analysis of citizens’ communicative practices shows that there are communicative spaces for politics emerging
Conclusions

on non-political discussion forums, such as Tieba and Yaolan. In current China, the political structure is very constrained. Although citizens are encouraged to participate in politics by the government and public opinion can be accommodated into the governance agenda, this top-down approach has a very state-elitist nature. Only the upper-middle class’s liberal-civil claims, which are in line with the modernization goals promoted by the state, are included in the dominant civil society and public sphere. The large number of citizens from the lower and working classes do not have an adequate political voice in the political structure and are subject to the rule of the state. Political talk and mundane communicative practices emerging from such talk in non-political forums opened up chances for ordinary citizens to directly articulate their experiences and perspectives about issues that have an impact on their daily life.

These alternative spaces offered Chinese citizens the opportunity to connect to the political via communication structures that do not necessarily fit into the normative requirements of the public sphere envisioned by Habermas. Moreover, the bottom-up approach of political engagement, via political talk in the internet-based everyday sphere, offers citizens the chance to speak from the “self”, share their personal experiences, and situate themselves in the political process. This orientation to the “self” in political talk goes beyond narrow self-interest but does promote the autonomy of individual wills. This is important for the cultivation of civic subjectivity and citizenship.

Furthermore, the diverse forms of self-expressions in political talk in the internet-based everyday sphere induce a new notion of politics that arises from the perspective of citizens and from the wider context of society. This new notion of politics obtains legitimacy because it is bottom up and incorporates ordinary citizens’ experiences, demands, and interests rooted in their everyday life. In the Chinese political landscape, the bottom-up expression of politics supplements the top-down approach of political arrangement, in which mainly elite citizens are invited to participate in a constrained political agenda within the political system. Through everyday online political talk, the political wills of ordinary Chinese citizens can be voiced while no voice is privileged because of social-political status. This is a major difference from the top-down hierarchical structure. Within this new notion of politics, all speech is valuable, whether participants engage in formal rational debate or express self-related experiences and feelings. In this sense, it is a politics of the people, in which the grassroots individuals are the main actors. This study therefore suggests that one of the most significant roles of everyday political talk on the Chinese internet could be that it may serve as an alternative path to engage
Chinese citizens in the broader political process. It could foster positive dynamics between society and the state in the grey area between control and resistance in China.

This study reveals the importance of keeping the autonomy of the everyday spaces in minjian (the unofficial) society, which provides a space for citizens to think about and act upon politics based on their life experiences. Thus, citizens could be empowered to explore their subjectivities, as well as practice intersubjectivity beyond the self in their day-to-day communications. This study implies that the top-down process of politicization does not necessarily live up to the ideals of engaging citizens in the political process. It might rather constrain citizens to develop their political agency in their lifeworld.