The Effects of the Internet on Collective Democratic Action in China

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The Effects of the Internet on Collective Democratic Action in China

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Abstract

Focussing on the effects of the Internet on collective democratic action in China, this research seeks to understand the ways in which the Internet may promote civic participation and the public sphere in China. It is concerned with the rich experiences and enduring human spirits of Chinese citizens trying to facilitate social change.

The research attempts to contribute to both constructing a theoretical framework for studying powers in collective democratic action in digital China, and exploring ways of conducting an in-depth empirical examination of Chinese Internet culture. To do so, an event-triggered framework is proposed, focusing on a public sphere ‘in formation’ in China. A public sphere ‘in formation’ is examined in the context of the long-term social transformation in China where this formation may always be invoked and refused at the same time. The study of this formation focuses on the mechanisms of social mobilisation of events, highlighting the interplay between powers of politics, the market, technology, and civil society in China. A case study of the 2013 Southern Weekly Incident is adopted to explore this framework.

In the investigation of the 2013 Southern Weekly Incident, I conducted 45 in-depth interviews. I examine the ways in which the Internet benefited journalists and citizens’ information acquisition and communication, as well as the ways in which journalists and citizens adopted the Internet to facilitate online contention. I examine the radicalisation of action on the street in this case in order to understand who, in the sensitive protesting environment in China, is still mobilised to protest, and why. For both online and offline action, I analyse the mechanisms of embodiment and emotions, a framework of connective action, and the form of online and offline action being seemingly segmented in the Southern Weekly Incident. My investigation of the negotiation taking place within media organisations and people’s self-restriction during the incident further accelerates discussion of the interplay and conflicts between powers in Chinese society. Through this case study, the public sphere ‘in formation’ in China is examined.
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I owe an enormous debt to all people who participated in my interviews in China. These people were certainly taking a risk in talking with me about the Southern Weekly Incident, which is considered a sensitive event in China. They offered me trust and provided fabulous accounts of their experiences and emotions during the incident. Many of them unreservedly shared with me their life history, which genuinely touched me and proved extremely valuable for the purposes of this research. For some journalists, their stories are so unique and well-known that it is almost impossible for me to conceal their identities in my writing. Despite this, they selflessly gave me permission to include their stories in my research report. So too did the activists in my interviews who insisted on me revealing the names by which they are publicly known. I know these decisions were not taken lightly. I hope the value of this research lives up their expectations and will honour the trust they gave to me. Their history, like many Chinese people’s, deserves to be respectfully recorded.

Journalists’ participation in my interviews contributed not only to the data used in my research, but also to the imparting of valuable observations and insights on various aspects of both journalism and Chinese society. Perhaps more importantly, they reminded me of how I felt when I was working as a journalist, holding both hopes and frustrations about China, which powerfully motivated me to strive for a complex understanding of China. I owe thanks to journalists and editors I used to work with in Southern Media. Their democratic ideologies, their courage and determination in the pursuit of social justice and promotion of journalistic idealism and professionalism, their valuing of humanity and respect for multiple cultures in China have constantly influenced me since our encounters, and motivated me to conduct this research.

By the time this thesis is complete, many journalists I interviewed for this research had left Southern Media – some had transitioned from media industries to a completely different career due to the dramatic changes taking place in the Chinese media landscape. I pay my highest respect to all of those who are and were media workers. They certainly had witnessed the democratisation and transformation of journalism in China in this unique period of history.

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Chapter 1 Introduction: A study on the Chinese Internet and beyond

During the first week of January 2013, my Chinese microblogging newsfeed was suddenly filled with emotional posts from my journalist network in China. As a former journalist and a friend of many of them, I could not resist being drawn into in this wave of rage provoked by a particular censorship incident taking place in Southern Media\(^1\), my former employer. Familiar voices expressing resistance to censorship flooded my laptop screen in my relatively peaceful flat in the UK, where I was able to freely use the Internet to access reports on the *Southern Weekly* Incident from western media.

The Incident was first sparked on Sina Weibo\(^2\) (a popular microblogging network, hereafter referred to as ‘Weibo’) after some Southern Media staff accused provincial official censors of crudely modifying the planned New Year Editorial of *Southern Weekly* newspaper which called for a constitutional government. The Weibo posts promptly generated online discussion on both Weibo and WeChat\(^3\) and further triggered a barrage of statements, open letters, and online petitions initiated by journalists and citizens, which were followed by citizens’ protests outside the office buildings of Southern Media. The one week discussion and subsequent events were met with severe suppression by the authorities and ended with citizens’ protest being suspended and discussion winding down. Three activists were charged in December 2013 for organising these protests.

At the time, reading the posts day and night, I was emotionally mobilised. To me, the emergence of the incident was exciting, particularly because the usual conflicts within editing rooms were being exposed to the public. It was also frustrating. The enormous power of repression held and used by the Chinese Communist Party apparatus was not weakened by a public display.

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1 Southern Media (or Nanfang Media Group) is one of the most influential media conglomerates in China. With headquarters in Guangzhou, China, the media group runs bureaux in various cities all over China. Founded in 1949 and formerly known as Nanfang Daily Group, the company currently publishes twelve newspapers and eight magazines, including well-known publications such as *Southern Weekly*, *Southern Metropolis Daily*, *21st Century Business Herald*, *Southern People Weekly* and others which are nationally distributed. The company also runs three websites and a publication press. Company website: http://www.nfmedia.com/

2 Weibo is the Chinese word for microblog. Popular Chinese microblogging services at present include Sina Weibo, Tencent Weibo, Sohu Weibo, and NetEase Weibo. Sina Weibo was launched by SINA Corporation in August 2009 and had assumed a population of 227 million Monthly Active Users (MAUs) by the end of September 2015 (C.I.W., 2016). Due to the popularity of Sina Weibo and its domain name weibo.com, Chinese media and users often refer to Sina Weibo simply as Weibo. Basic Weibo functions include message, private message, comment, re-post, like, save. It has been regarded by scholars as being akin to a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook which are blocked in China.

3 WeChat, known as ‘Wei Xin’ in Chinese, is a popular mobile text and voice messaging communication service developed by Tencent in China, available on Android, iPhone, BlackBerry, Windows Phone and Symbian phones (Web-based access is also available). WeChat was first released in January 2011 and the Monthly Active Users of WeChat Messaging app had reached 600 million people by August 2015 (Millward, 2015). Key features of WeChat include text messaging, hold-to-talk voice messaging, ‘moments’ which enables users to share text, photographs and videos to his network, location sharing, and ‘public accounts’ which enables them to push feeds to subscribers.
Eventually, the incident ended without creating new opportunities for press freedom, leaving an air of disappointment and resignation. Reading the posts and articles that condemned journalists for not acting more determinedly and strongly, I was provoked again and felt defensive; what is revealed by such an incident is not simply a tit-for-tat battle between the censors and a newspaper, but a window into complex issues relating to power and culture in China.

The emergence of the Southern Weekly Incident in 2013 is remarkable in both the fields of journalistic practice and politics in China. On the surface, the case was a censorship conflict between Southern Weekly, a prominent nationally circulated newspaper belonging to Southern Media Group, and the provincial government’s official propaganda department, while at a deeper level it was a confrontation of Chinese citizens against authority around the long-term issue of press freedom. It is a meaningful case in the field of Chinese activism in the sense that as an event focusing on ideological issues in China, it generated both online and offline action that pushed the limits of collective democratic action in 2013 China. It presented meaningful mechanisms of social mobilisation through a peculiar form of online and offline action.

Without attempting to generalise or define collective democratic action in China, I study this case to shed light on the tension and dynamics of different forces involved in Chinese society. I pursue an understanding of the cultural complexity and enduring human spirits in Chinese society. I give most attention to the rich experiences of Chinese citizens trying to facilitate social change. In particular, I examine the enabling role the Internet plays as an information source, an interactive space, and a tool for mobilising collective action in relation to democratic practice (Zheng and Wu, 2005; Yu, 2006; Yang, 2009).

Focusing on the effects of the Internet on collective democratic action in China, this research seeks to understand the ways in which the Internet may promote civic participation and the public sphere in China. This research contributes to Internet studies, in the sense that the Chinese Internet provides a particular prism, where the complex power relation between politics, market, technology, and civil society allows valuable exploration of what may also be true of the Internet in other countries.

In June 2015, the number of Internet users in China reached 668 million, accounting for 48.8% of the total population (CNNIC, 2015), making China home to the world’s largest Internet population (University of Oxford, 2015). The friction between free Internet usage and strict government supervision is a defining characteristic of contemporary Chinese Internet culture and attracts extensive attention from political, economic, and cultural perspectives. Not only is online content strictly monitored, censored and controlled by the government, but the network itself and the supporting technologies are managed by cabinet-level governmental units (e.g. Ministry of Industry and Information Technology of the People's Republic China: MIIT) and monopolistic state-owned enterprises (e.g. China Telecom). Despite this, the Internet is fast becoming the most powerful media promoting democratic activities in China.
As Zheng (2007) states, from the very beginning it was widely expected that the development of the Internet would have a great socio-political impact on authoritarian China, but those with high expectations were disillusioned by the reality of the Internet being utilised by the Chinese Communist Party as an instrument for control. A developing body of literature concerning the effects of the Internet on Chinese society and examining the socio-political consequences that the Internet can bring has been presented by studies across the disciplines of anthropology, politics, sociology, and media studies. Existing studies foreground the communal sense of social interaction facilitated by the Internet (in issues such as the public sphere and civil society) and highlight the negotiation between the state and society (e.g. Calhoun, 1989; Zheng and Wu, 2005; Yu, 2006). From this perspective, the meanings of Internet language and symbols that contribute essentially to a Chinese contemporary culture have also been explored (e.g. Yang, 2009). Existing studies have also shed light on the power of the political economy that intends to dominate the development of technology in shaping the communication system in China (e.g. Zhou, 2006; Zhao, 2008). At the same time, technology shaping other social powers through the transformation of the totality of the communication system in China is also emphasised through concepts such as mediation (e.g. Yu, 2006; Meng, 2010).

My research grounds the examination of these dynamics in a case study to understand Chinese people’s embodied experiences in a digital China. It attempts to contribute to both constructing a theoretical framework for studying powers in collective democratic action in digital China, and exploring ways to conduct an in-depth empirical examination of Chinese Internet culture. To do so, I will first propose a theoretical and methodological framework and then I will use this framework to examine the case study of the already briefly discussed Southern Weekly Incident.

I will now outline my thesis structure.

Chapter 2 locates my research in the field of Internet studies, and articulates technological empowerment and the public sphere as key themes to study the Chinese Internet. I propose to study the Chinese Internet and the public sphere in the context of a long-term social transformation. I contextualise the discussion of power and domination of the Internet in the multi-layered power configuration in China, highlighting the relation between the state’s control and citizens’ resistance through the Internet. I examine the ways of studying the Internet and the public sphere in China, highlighting that the public sphere in digital China should be studied as ‘in formation’ rather than in existence and the formation of a Chinese public sphere is itself a social movement.

In order to understand the formation of a Chinese public sphere in the long-term, in Chapter 3, I examine the way of studying collective action in digital China. My literature review of social movement and collective action focuses on forming systems of collective action, highlighting the importance of emotions in forming action. I also examine the concept of embodiment to explore the mechanisms of collective action in digital China, where collective action follows a framework
of connective action. I then examine the way of understanding online and offline action in China, particularly focusing on online voice activities and the radicalisation of action in China.

After reviewing literature on Internet studies, collective action, and Chinese studies, in Chapter 4 I summarise the research issues posed by my research and propose an event-triggered framework to study the Chinese Internet and the formation of the public sphere. The Southern Weekly Incident is introduced to empirically explore this framework. I introduce the methods used in my research, proposing to conduct qualitative, reflexive, and situated research through the methods of online observation and qualitative content analysis, in-depth interviewing, and collecting and analysing contextual data.

The case study of Southern Weekly Incident is then presented throughout Chapter 5, Chapter 6, and Chapter 7. Chapter 5 introduces the storyline of the Southern Weekly Incident through the phases of information dissemination, online contention, and radicalisation of offline protest. Chapter 6 provides my account of the peculiar mechanisms, framework and form of action in the Southern Weekly Incident. I first analyse journalists and citizens’ embodied experiences in the Southern Weekly Incident, highlighting various emotions and people’s past experiences. I discuss the emotion of moral shame as a mechanism that shaped a distinct dynamic in journalists’ action. I then examine a framework of connective action in the Southern Weekly Incident, focusing on diverse appeals of journalists, citizens, and activists who were involved in the Southern Weekly Incidents and their personalised expressions. Finally, I discuss the form of online and offline action being seemingly segmented in the Southern Weekly Incident. Chapter 7 investigates journalists and citizens’ negotiation with the authorities and the self, in order to examine how the specific political conditions, media culture, and social ideologies shaped the Southern Weekly Incident through both authoritarian control and people’s self-restriction. In this way, the investigation in Chapter 7 accelerates the examination of the mechanisms, framework and form of action in the complex Chinese context. I also discuss the controversial testimony published by Southern Media in which they assisted the state in charging three citizens for participating in the Southern Weekly Incident. This highlights the complexity of collective action in the Chinese context.

At the end, wider issues relating to the technology and the formation of the public sphere of Chinese society are further discussed in Chapter 8. Complex as human entities are, the meanings of information, culture, and power in contemporary societies are multi-dimensional, fluid, and contextualised, hence the beginning of this voyage from China.
Chapter 2  The Internet and the formation of the public sphere in China

In Chapter 2, I first locate my research in the field of Internet studies, and articulate technological empowerment and the public sphere as key themes in studying the Chinese Internet. I propose to study the Chinese Internet and the public sphere in the context of a long-term social transformation of China. I then contextualise the discussion of Internet control in the multi-layered structure of power in China, highlighting the relation between the state’s control and citizens’ resistance through the Internet. I finally examine the ways of studying the Internet and the public sphere in China, highlighting that the public sphere in digital China should be studied as being ‘in formation’ rather than in existence and the formation of a Chinese public sphere is itself a social movement.

2.1. The Internet and technological empowerment

Internet studies attends to the affordances of Internet-based information technologies, seeks to study human communication facilitated by the Internet, and brings into play political, economic, and cultural contexts to analyse and reflect on Internet-facilitated communication and its interaction with multiple fields (Wellman, 2004). Ess and Consalvo (2011, p.2) argue that Internet studies is ‘constituted by an extensive body of research that defines and depends upon multiple methodologies and approaches that have demonstrated their usefulness in distilling the multiple interactions made possible via the Internet’. Internet studies as a research field on its own draws on disciplines throughout social sciences, humanities, arts, natural sciences, and others. It is therefore ‘a multidisciplinarity or interdisciplinarity’ that aggregates methodological and theoretical frameworks of all these disciplines (Ess and Consalvo, 2011, p.2).

In Digital Methods (Rogers, 2013), Rogers proposes a methodological outlook for Internet research. Besides adopting traditional methods to study digital phenomenon and using digital tools such as social media and instant messaging applications to conduct online research, Rogers (2013, p.5) argues that researchers can utilise ‘native’ elements of digital communication to ‘learn from how the dominant devices treat natively digital objects’. In this way of examining how digital media operate and are consciously shaped in particular contexts, research may go beyond Internet research to explore social, political, and cultural issues. Contextualisation is crucial in Internet studies. Scheneider and Goto-jones (2014) argue that digital media need to be understood in particular social and historical contexts hence the need to introduce diverse contexts in Internet studies. Drawing on this, Schneider’s (2015) analysis of the Google search engine in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan demonstrates that the political economy of Chinese search engines ‘leads to biased search engine results’, particularly through business models of centralised content production that ‘fit neatly into the Chinese government’s strategies for internet governance’ (Schneider, 2015, p.72). At the expense of content diversity, companies such as Google in Asia curate their content ‘in-house’ (Schneider, 2015, p.72).
In this section I will review some of the key concepts relating to Internet studies in order to better understand how I may examine technological empowerment and the public sphere in relation to Internet usage in China. Firstly I will examine the ways of conceptualising the Internet as a research subject, which requires me to explain my approach to the relation between online and offline in my research. Then I will introduce technological empowerment, which addresses the relation between technologies and powers in society and forms the central research theme in my research.

To conceptualise the Internet as a research subject, it helps to ask about the existing form of the Internet first in order to know where and how we may envision its interaction with other forms of powers. Hine’s (2000) introduction of two conceptualisations - the Internet representing a place and the Internet as a cultural artefact - represents an early approach to establishing distinctive views of the Internet as a research subject. To study the Internet as a place, a social space (cyberspace) ‘where culture is formed and reformed’ means examining the forming and sustaining of social realities such as identity and communication produced in this social space (Hine, 2000, p.9). With this orientation, ethnographic studies of online settings study social norms on the Internet. To view the Internet as a cultural artefact means to regard the Internet as ‘a product of culture’ or as ‘a technology that was produced by particular people with contextually situated goals and properties’ (Hine, 2000, p.9).

From a viewpoint of socio-technical interactionism, Mackenzie and Wajcman (1999) claim technology is shaped by ‘the entire way a society is organised’, such as the economic calculation of market profits behind the development of technology and states’ sponsorship in technological projects (p. 14). It is safe to say that the Internet is today commonly accepted as a cultural entity which sees things happen on it, through it, towards it, and because of it. Rather than opting for either of Hine’s conceptualisations, scholars of Internet studies tend to consider both of her orientations to strive for complexity (Ess and Consalvo, 2011; Jensen, 2011). The established themes of fields of new media, network studies, social movement and others suggest that the Internet is envisioned as a multi-dimensional and a multicomponent complex. The Internet is a hub of human activities and culture, and as technology it is shaped by social powers. It is by considering features of different aspects of the Internet as a complex entity that technological empowerment, a key focus of my research topic, may be examined.

Understanding technological empowerment requires me to be cautious of technological determinism, a simple cause-and-effect correlation in which technologies are themselves considered to have intrinsic social effects, enforcing consequences of social change (Mackenzie and Wajcman, 1999; Schneider and Goto-Jones, 2014). Clearly this is not the case with Internet technologies as they are embedded in human agency and social structures (Jensen, 2011; Schneider and Goto-Jones, 2014; Schneider, 2015). Drawing on the concept of affordances, Hutchby (2001, p.444) claims that technologies should be understood as possessing affordances which, on ‘functional and relational’ levels, ‘frame, while not determining, the possibilities for
agentic action in relation to an object’. Technologies ‘may be both shaped by and shaping of the practices humans use in interaction with, around and through them’ (Hutchby, 2001, p.444). Hutchby (2003, p.587) therefore argues for the need to focus on ‘the nature of human interaction with, or via, certain technological devices’ rather than ‘the nature of technologies per se’. In a similar vein, Slater (2002) argues that researchers need to move from asking about ‘media characteristics’ to asking ‘whether new media users make a distinction between online and offline, and if they do, when and why do they do it’ (Slater, 2002, p.543). A similar idea can be seen in Hine’s (2000) argument that the meanings and perceptions which people bring online are shaped by their expectations and the settings from which they access the Internet.

Examining people’s use of the Internet also raises the issue of the relationship between online and offline, which is continuously contested by researchers. Separating online and offline is problematic in reality and unhelpful in research. Slater (2002) points out that earlier Internet research in which the Internet was discussed as a virtual space separated from the actual world saw the properties of the Internet as ‘intrinsic properties of the media themselves’ and are identified independently from how people use it, which is a type of technological determinism (p. 543). Online activities entail meanings of identities, selfhood, philosophy and ethics that are formed in the entire actual life experiences (Ess, 2012). Garcia et al. (2009) argue that ‘there is one social world which contains both traditional and technologically advanced modes of communication and sites of social activity’ (p. 54), and therefore the setting of contemporary study on online phenomena, should still be defined ‘to include relevant offline components of the social world as well as the CMC [computer-mediated communication]’ (p. 56). Schneider (2015) argues that ‘spatial metaphors – be they the virtual cities of digital media studies or the continents and nation states of Area Studies’ are ‘insufficient in explaining the complexity that we face in our lives today’ (p. 58) and we need to pay sufficient attention to how technologies ‘are embedded and anchored in everyday practices’ (p. 87). Clearly, human activities on the Internet are a part of human action and experience, and are not separate from offline experience (For further reference, see Ess and Consalvo, 2011; Jensen, 2011; Ess, 2012)

My research explores cultural meanings and forms of power in the use of Internet-based technologies, and aims to capture the interaction between human efforts and the affordances of technologies. The blended setting across the online and offline is where my study is embedded. My investigation includes both online and offline dimensions which complement each other to establish the meanings contained in citizens’ transition between online and offline, but by no means can my research on online activities be conducted solely in the online setting. Though online and offline are inseparable, my examination retains the terminology of the online and offline in order to explore their similarities and differences, and establish the connections between them. This acknowledges Garcia et al.’s (2009) emphasis of the cohesive entity of online and offline activities, and follows Hine (2000) and Slater’s (2002) injunction not to assume the division of offline and online but to investigate if the division is formed in people’s perception in using the
Internet in their social and cultural actions, and in my research, in collective democratic action where technological empowerment is examined.

Issues of social shaping and technological determinism are particularly important in relation to issues of power and technology, in particular to the idea of revitalising the public sphere. The popularity of the Internet has inspired the prospect of citizens’ direct participation in popular democratic action. The classic form of direct democracy assumes that citizens ‘enjoy political equality’ and have ‘sovereign power’ to assemble, and so that they are regularly able to gather together in some way to debate and decide public policy and directly participate in legislative and judicial decision making (Held, 2006, p.27). Idealist theorists such as Jean Jacques Rousseau (1762) stress that a totality of people’s will should be enlightened and generated through legislative assemblies in public meeting, and the primary aim of this direct, participatory model of democracy is to incite citizens to become members of the community. In light of the wide network and publicity facilitated by the Internet, the ideal of direct political participation has been refashioned. The use of the Internet has triggered some celebration of the accessibility of new communication channels that not only allow everyone to post, but also provide extra information that potentially helps people make a reasoned, evidence-based judgement (Budge, 1996; Ferdinand, 2000; Dahlgren, 2005). The use of different types of digital technologies has also changed the efficiency and effectiveness of human interaction (Benkler, 2006). Avoiding simple dichotomies of optimism and pessimism, I must now address the relation between the Internet and the public sphere.

2.2. The Internet and the public sphere

In this section, I start with the introduction of the concept of the public sphere developed by Habermas in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere in 1962. Drawing on the original concept, I articulate a way of examining the effects of Internet use on the construction of the public sphere. It will then become important to attend to the argument of the political economy of the Internet to further examine the relationship between the Internet and the public sphere.

2.2.1. The public sphere in a Habermasian sense

The public sphere in a Habermasian sense is a historically specific concept embedded in a complex set of social conditions and presuppositions related to a liberal model of bourgeois society in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe. The public sphere was conceived as a sociality model in which individuals gather together to become a public, using reasoning to articulate the needs of the society in relation to the state. People’s gathering and articulation in this sphere are to some extent proactive rather than being forced or constrained by the state or external pressure. People’s opinions are openly and freely exchanged. Critical publicity is the nature of the public sphere. Critical opinions are at the centre of people’s rational communication and discussion. In addition, the parity between people during social intercourse within the public sphere is institutionally crucial. As Habermas (1989) puts it, ‘power and prestige of public office were held in suspense; economic dependencies also in principle had no influence’ (p. 36). These
are the core ideas of the public sphere, but they require historical and contextual elaboration to get to grips with the complexity of the concept. I will now explain the social and economic conditions in which the Habermasian public sphere was embedded during its emergence and development in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It will then be useful to articulate the constituents of the public sphere. Following Habermas, I will then examine the degeneration of the public sphere starting from the nineteenth century.

The public sphere was initially built upon a division of the intimate sphere (mainly referring to the family) and the social sphere. The intimate domain of conjugal families was where people’s ‘audience-oriented subjectivity’ was nurtured, and this ‘audience-oriented subjectivity’ formed a crucial basis to people’s ability to reason during discussion in the public sphere (Habermas, 1989, p.28). A clear threshold between the state and society was essential for the ongoing articulation of public opinions especially for political debate. The development of literacy and the science of psychology also greatly influenced people’s capacity in critical discussion (Habermas, 1989).

All of these social conditions are embedded in the economic development of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and particularly facilitated by the remarkable development of capitalism and market economics. To put it another way, the public sphere is attached to the societies that were bourgeois (Calhoun, 1992). After all, the subtitle of Structural Transformation – ‘An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society’— aptly reveals Habermas’s focus on the bourgeois society, and more specifically, ‘the liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere’ (Habermas, 1989, p.xviii). As Habermas explains, ‘it refers to those features of a historical constellation that attained dominance and leaves aside the plebeian public sphere as a variant that in a sense was suppressed in the historical process’ (1989, p.xviii). In Habermas’s account, it was this propertied and educated class that formed the bourgeois class and became subjects in the public sphere. As Habermas (1989) argues, press publications usually did not reach the ‘common man’, but at best the ‘educated classes’, who were ‘mostly jurists … added to them were doctors, pastors, officers, professors, and “scholars”’ (p. 22-23). Since access to information was crucial to public discourse, Habermas argues that the stratum of bourgeois capitalists – the merchants, bankers, entrepreneurs, and manufacturers – ‘was the real carrier of the public’ (p.23).

Habermas (1989) argues that an example of the full development of the political public sphere can be found in Great Britain at the close of the eighteenth century where ‘civil society as the private sphere was emancipated from the directives of public authority’, but unfortunately, this ideal model ‘lasted only for one blissful moment in the long history of capitalist development’ (p. 79). Habermas’s (1989) articulation of the degeneration of the public sphere provides a critical review of democratic conditions in modern societies that is still valuable today (Fraser, 1990; Calhoun, 1992; Dahlgren, 2005; Yang and Calhoun, 2007). Regarding Habermas’s work as ‘an indispensable resource’ for theorising the limits of democracy in late capitalist societies, Fraser (1990) claims that ‘no attempt to understand the limits of actually existing late capitalist democracy can succeed without in some way or another making use of it’ (p. 57). An obvious question is: if
the public sphere is so specifically bourgeois in its social conditions and constituents, what is the realistic significance of examining or pursuing this model in those modern societies which are not bourgeois, or not established on the social conditions of capitalist development?

Calhoun (1992) argues that ‘Habermas does not mean to suggest that what made the public sphere bourgeois was simply the class composition of its members. Rather, it was society that was bourgeois, and bourgeois society produced a certain form of public sphere’ (p.7). Calhoun’s argument opens up the possibility that the public sphere may not be bourgeois in its constituents and as a model it may be attached to other social formations. To approach this model in another way, the value of the critiques of the bourgeois public sphere can be recognised in conjunction with a curiosity for exploring other types of public spheres. The message here is suggestive of broader exploration through different ways of applying the theory. These explorations then rest on particular societies and time.

I must now address the degeneration of the public sphere in nineteenth century society to understand what structural conditions fundamentally undermined the public sphere, in so doing to find out how modern technologies may help to overcome the limits. Addressing this degeneration will clarify what needs discussion in understanding the public sphere in China.

The development of capitalism and market economics facilitated the emergence and advancement of the public sphere, but it also led, however, to the transformation that finally caused the degeneration of the public sphere. As Habermas argues, this was engineered by the mutual penetration of the state and society, and the polarisation of the social sphere and the intimate sphere. This process was accompanied by the development of a commercial culture particularly in the world of letters (literacy world) (Habermas, 1989).

To be more specific, Habermas firstly argues that the once distinct state and society became interlocked. On the state's side, there came about a policy of neomercantilism in which interventionism was embraced by the state as a solution to the conflicts of private interest which ‘could no longer be settled with the private sphere alone’ (Habermas, 1989, p.142). On society’s side, a kind of refeudalisation went hand in hand with the neomercantilism, in which private organisations increasingly attempted to assume public power (Habermas, 1989).

Secondly, Habermas argues that the intimate sphere and social sphere were polarised which made the gathering of private people to form a social sphere almost impossible. With the welfare state providing personal support, the family lost its functions of upbringing and education, protection, care, and guidance and gradually lost its position as the primary agency of society. The family became only an illusion of an inner space where privacy was protected. Thus the domain that was once shaped within the family began to dissolve (Habermas, 1989).

Thirdly, Habermas (1989) argues that commercialisation caused the effects deep within cultural industries, mass media, and the family sphere. The market of the cultural industries eased access
for a larger public by not only cheapening the cost of the cultural products, but also dumbing down the content to cater to a broader audience. *Yellow journalism* came about in the press based on commercialisation without the demands of the literary level. The demands for upgrading and expanding the press led to the interdependence of marketing and editorial direction. The parties and organisations manipulated the effectiveness of publicity. Habermas argues that the public was split apart into a small group of specialists who unpublicly pursued critical arguments and the great mass of consumers whose opinions were uncritical. As a consequence, the form of communication required specifically for public discussion was lost (Habermas, 1989).

Commercialisation invaded the family sphere and people’s leisure time with entertainment. Commercialised entertainment filled the family sphere with ‘noncommittal use of leisure time’ thus taking the place of *the world of letters* which used to shape subjectivity in the bourgeois family’s intimate sphere (p. 159). The bourgeois salons where public discussion took place also went out of fashion. The bourgeois forms of sociability became ‘apolitical’ and were dominated by ‘the leisure activities of the culture-consuming public’, exemplified by people going to the movies together, listening to the radio, or watching television (Habermas, 1989, p.163). Habermas therefore claims that the culture-debating public at the centre of the public sphere shifted to a culture-consuming public.

All in all, with the distinction between public and private realms becoming blurred, the family and social sphere becoming increasingly polarised, and rational critical debate gradually giving way to the consumption of culture, the public sphere degenerated in the nineteenth century. As a straightforward solution, preserving or rebuilding a critical public under the conditions of the democratic social-welfare state requires linking the type of ‘informal, personal, non-public opinions’ which is ‘publicity-critical’ and the type of ‘formal, institutionally authorized opinions’ which is ‘manipulative’ (Habermas, 1989, p.245). Habermas (1989) argues that only when these two domains of communication are mediated can public critical opinions be presented. This connectedness, in my view, is the process of publicisation of personal opinions, which is nothing new but reemphasises the central idea of the public sphere being concerned with publicly presenting communication. This can be regarded as a conclusive idea of the public sphere which is fundamental in my examination of the public sphere ‘in formation’ in China.

To invoke Habermas’s notion of the public sphere in the context of China, it is more useful to ask what norms from Habermas’s account of the public sphere can be extracted to construct the architecture of the public sphere that is significant in articulating sociality and democracy in China. I identify a set of norms which are crucial for facilitating the practice of a Habermasian public sphere and I will take them forward to discuss the public sphere in Chinese social conditions. First, there is information accessibility which ensures the availability of information required in the discussion of particular social issues. Ideally, information should be available for the whole population. However, the requirement of an absolute openness of information to all people may come second to the accessibility itself, as exemplified by Habermas’s account of the bourgeois
public sphere. It may be reasonable to accept that in most societies, elites or middle class, as a group who own relatively high social status and are better educated, are subsequently granted more information resources thus becoming the main facilitators of public discussion. Second, there is the need for an open platform for public discussion. This platform is ideally free from control by political and economic forces, and all participants of various social statuses are granted with parity in debate. Third, it is required that participants have the capacity for rational articulation. The exchange of critical opinions ensures the validity of public discussion. Fourth, it is required that citizens have the desire to participate in public discourse, and their desire essentially facilitates the initiation and operation of the public sphere.

In summary, the public sphere in discussion represents the process of popular participation in which people gain information, discuss views with the use of reasoning, and articulate their needs with the authorities. To realise these elements, people need to have access to acquiring information, a platform to facilitate public discussion, the capacity to hold rational debate and articulation, and most fundamentally, the desire and motivation to participate in public discussion. Therefore, information accessibility, discussion implementation, rationality, and initiative of people are the norms I would like to take forward from Habermas’s construction of the public sphere to explore the relevant affordances of the Internet in China.

Rather than arguing whether it is possible to recreate the same historical conditions of Habermas’s ideal public sphere, it is more helpful to focus on whether the current conditions facilitated by new technologies can create new effects for overcoming the problems Habermas believes were constraining the development of the public sphere, or in other words, to recreate the connectedness that Habermas emphasises. To clarify, my examination of the potential of the Internet in facilitating this connectedness is considered from two dimensions. First, how may the Internet facilitate the norms of the public sphere – information accessibility, discussion implementation, rationality, and initiatives of people? Second, how may the Internet overcome the limits of developing the public sphere in modern societies? Following these I will be able to take forward a complex idea of the public sphere and examine it in the context of China.

It is important that the examination pursues a wide view on the various perspectives which I have introduced, and allows these perspectives to be cross-studied. Dahlgren (2005) provides three dimensions to conceptualise the public sphere in any society; the structural, the representational, and the interactional.

The structural dimension is concerned with the institutional features of media such as the political economy, ownership, regulation, and financing of media organisations, as well as lawful definitions of the freedoms of and constrains on communication (Dahlgren, 2005). This dimension therefore encapsulates those elements determining information accessibility to the public, and those elements ensuring or repressing democratic values of communication. In the representational dimension, the quality of media content, in particular the ideological patterns of information such as ‘accuracy, completeness, pluralism of views, agenda setting, ideological
tendencies, modes of address’ are raised (Dahlgren, 2005, p.149). The interactional dimension is precisely introduced in the sense that citizens use media to interact with other people. Dahlgren (2005) also argues for adopting civic cultures as a complementary perspective to the three dimensions. In this perspective, parameters of ‘values, affinity, knowledge, identities, and practices’ behind citizens as social agents need to be analysed as the cultural factors (Dahlgren, 2005, p.158). An extensive body of scholarship has provided valuable insights from these dimensions to examine the relation between the Internet and the public sphere.

The dissolution of boundaries between nation-states on the Internet has been celebrated and triggered the aspiration of the global public sphere (Volkmer, 2003; Dencik, 2011). The Public spheres are discussed as existing on multiple levels (Keane, 2000) and multiple sectors in forms such as e-government, civic forums, Net-based news organisations and so on (Dahlgren, 2005). Dahlgren (2005) suggests that multiple spaces on the Internet allow citizens belonging to different groups and cultures to commit to participation and form different collective identities. The interactive interface of the Internet inspires discussion about the revitalisation of the public (Poster, 1995), specifically addressing the provision of opportunities for spontaneous participation and the provision of pluralistic information sources (Zheng and Wu, 2005; Benkler, 2006). Benkler (2006) argues that individuals communicate their observations and viewpoints to others through a networked public sphere without needing to access major media organisations and ‘in a way that cannot be controlled by media owners and is not as easily corruptible by money as were the mass media’ (p. 11). By enabling individuals to easily and immediately communicate about their own observations, the Internet contributes to the cultural effects on nurturing individuals’ engagement in political conversation (Benkler, 2006). The idea of citizens’ sense of citizenship being enhanced is the central focus of Rousseau’s ideal democracy.

Rethinking Habermas’s criticism of the disappearance of the family sphere, which he believes should help facilitate the practice of reasoning and rational thinking, it is reasonable to consider whether the capacity for critical thinking of modern residents in digitalised societies is now nurtured through more individualised processes, such as self-learning, individual thinking, and self-publishing. Arguably, these processes are promoted by digital media providing pluralistic information resources, making public discussion observable to many people, and offering platforms for user-generated content like blogs and public accounts. The commercialised culture of mass media, which caused the erosion of critical thinking in Habermas’s account, undeniably also exists on the Internet and has been criticised by the political economy approach to studying the Internet (Dean, 2003; Zhao, 2008). However, people’s rationality and initiative of democratic deliberation may also be enhanced by digital culture and this aspect should not be overshadowed by consumerism.

The penetration of the state and society, which Habermas argues fundamentally changed the social conditions of the public sphere in the nineteenth century, also needs to be reconsidered. New technology seems to allow much more effective observation of the processes of
administration and therefore administration might become more transparent and amenable to democratic pressures from ordinary citizens. This is seen as ‘a virtuous circle of increasing transparency leading to greater efficiency and then to greater democracy’ (Ferdinand, 2000, p.5), and thus enhancing the effectiveness of the public sphere. More importantly, in authoritarian countries such as China, as my research will demonstrate, the detachment of society from the state that ensured the independence of the civil society has never been completely realised. The Internet offers the potential to facilitate civil conditions.

The concept of the public sphere becomes prominent in studying China in the digital age as it focuses on the communication between citizens and foregrounds state-society relations. Being able to attain information from sources beyond official Chinese media and express diverging views collectively and relatively freely is novel in China. The Internet in China benefits citizens’ information acquisition and provides an interactive space for public political discourse (Zheng and Wu, 2005; Zheng, 2007; Yang, 2009). Yu (2006) argues that the Internet empowers urban Chinese people to participate in the making of media stories with journalists, and in this way, Chinese citizens are exercising the right to know and the right to speak. In Chinese society, the consciousness of rights is mediated by new media space. Active citizens practise citizenship through online discussions, petitions and protests which ‘can influence public opinion, check the authority, and even challenge the political agendas of the government’ (Yu, 2006, p.304).

Scholars, however, have argued that new technologies may at the same time undermine some essential conditions for civic participation. Most effectively, political economists have argued that the effects of the Internet on international political economy hinder the empowerment of individuals in the global context (Thussu, 2007; Herman and McChesney, 1997; Norris, 2001; McChesney, 2001; Dean, 2003, 2005). I will now attend to the political economy of the Internet to further the examination of possibilities for technological empowerment facilitated by the Internet. After this, the chapter will focus on discussing the Internet and the public sphere in the Chinese context.

2.2.2. The political economy of the Internet

The tradition of political economy counters the optimistic view of the Internet as empowering ordinary citizens in the context of global capitalism. Digital media is criticised for contributing to a new form of imperialism through the concentration of media ownership in a global market (McChesney, 2001). Broader arguments also make the case that cultural imperialism is facilitated by what Thussu (2007) introduces as ‘global infotainment’ which is led by American style journalism that ‘privileges privatized soft news – about celebrities, crime, corruption and violence – and presents it as a form of spectacle, at the expense of news about political, civic and public affairs’ (Thussu, 2007, p.8). The digital divide is discussed by Norris (2001) not only as the global divide that concerns the divergence of Internet access between countries, but also the social divide that concerns the information gap between the information rich and poor within societies, and the democratic divide which signifies different level of engagement with digital resources for
public discourses. The digital divide undermines the possibility for the Internet to enhance the openness and transparency of the political system for the mass of the population. Papacharissi (2010) similarly questions digital citizenship by pointing out the unequal access between citizens and the insufficient civic use of the Internet. She claims that an individual’s technological skills and ability to access the web for a multiplicity of purposes are associated with higher education and income levels. In this sense, the pervasive application of new technologies can lead to a pernicious circle of the rich being further empowered and the power of the poor continually being weakened. At the same time, online media reproduce inequalities of class, gender, and race in the sense that people’s online networks are established around their offline networks and social status are re-presented online. The popularity of entertainment consumption online also contests the civic use of the Internet for a public sphere (Papacharissi, 2010). Schneider (2015) argues that technologies ‘are often created by elites to serve certain purposes’ (p. 87). Technology thus is programmed with biases of contextual politics and culture and ‘it makes it easy for users to remain in their parochial worlds and avoid serendipity’ (Schneider, 2015, p.86).

Political economy as a theory for critically examining Internet culture is relevant to the social and democratic perspectives of my research, particularly to the digital divide in China and individuals’ use of the Internet for political discourse. I will now articulate these two issues.

First, concerns surrounding the digital division in China relate to the relatively small rural population who are able to get online, in contrast with the urban majority (Yu, 2006; Zhao, 2008). I would like to point out that the digital division in China, though undeniable, by no means hinders my exploration which focuses on the democratic changes brought about by the use of the Internet in China. The democratisation process in contemporary China which I am examining could not possibly happen without using the Internet to offer information, encourage discussion and facilitate the mobilisation of collective action, even if it also misses some parts of the population. To take dissident activity for example, dissident activity may only be a small part of online activities, but it is a potent composition. The significance of online activism does not necessarily require a large number of participants (Yu, 2006; Yang, 2009). Furthermore, statistics from CNNIC shows that among the people who recently went online during the first half of 2015, the rural population contributes to 48.0% of the total 18.94 million people. This figure shows the changing Internet landscape in China and indicates a possible trend toward a narrowing digital division.

The second issue concerns an online culture that distracts from political participation. Given that China has grown to be the world’s biggest online marketplace (eMarketer, 2014), the effects of political economy that are transmitted through individuals’ online consumption in China are worth discussing in my research as they may counter the democratic effects of the Internet. The political scientist Jodi Dean’s (2005) idea of communicative capitalism deals with the mechanisms of political economy of Internet usage and foregrounds political manipulation by the states. I will examine her ideas to articulate the ways in which I deal with the countering effects of political economy on promoting democracy.
Dean (2005, p.56) argues that communicative exchanges facilitated by the Internet are ‘the basic elements of capitalist production’ and entrap people in a mode of capitalist domination. For her, this is conceptualised as communicative capitalism and is implemented through the fantasy of abundance which is created by the intense circulation of content in networked communication. Dean (2005) claims that today’s communication exchanges produce messages that merely contribute to the circulation of content rather than messages that are responded to and taken into account in policy making. As she puts it, ‘the circulation of content in the dense, intensive networks of global communications relieves top-level actors (corporate, institutional and governmental) from the obligation to respond’ (Dean, 2005, p.53). For her, the ideal type of communicative interactions of the public sphere are supposed to impact official politics. However, the fantasy of abundance consumes people’s drive to real political participation (Dean, 2005).

Drawing on the theory of post-politics introduced by Zizek (1999, cited by Dean, 2005), Dean points out in post-politics that people’s matters ‘are simply treated in all their particularity, as specific issues to be addressed therapeutically, juridically, spectacularly or disciplinarily’, in short, as ‘personal issues or technical concerns’, rather than being treated as elements of larger signifying chains or political formations’ (p. 56). Dean therefore explains the materialisation of democratic values, in line with the view of post-politics. As she puts it, essential values of democracy – such as ideals of ‘access, inclusion, discussion and participation’, ‘take material form in networked communications technologies’, in particular the ‘expansions, intensifications and interconnections of global telecommunications’ (Dean, 2005, p.55).

The fantasy of abundance is more precisely operated by what Dean calls technological fetish, which includes three patterns: condensation, displacement, and foreclosure. Specifically, Dean claims that contributing to the information circulation contains ‘a subjective registration effect’, which makes people believe that what they contribute matters and means something therefore their contribution is ‘a kind of communicative action’ (2005, p.60). The complexities of politics are condensed into one problem and one solution which foregrounds technology. The issue of democracy becomes all about technological facilitation and asks for better information accessibility. People’s everyday activities are all perceived as being political thus displacing the real politics that is supposed to be from the hard work of organising and struggling. The technological fetish, implying the political immediacy of people’s everyday activities, excludes the actual possibility of politicisation thus, according to Dean, foreclosing real politics. In this way, communicative capitalism prevents politicisation and undermines people’s capacity for democracy (Dean, 2005).

Dean (2003) specifically points to the issues of equality, rationality, and inclusivity of the Internet and concludes that ‘cyberia’s lack and its excess’ prevents the Internet becoming a public sphere (Dean, 2003, p.97). Dean argues that the Internet is too sexist, racist, and offensive and thus not inclusive enough and not interactive enough to be a public sphere (Dean, 2003). On the opposite side, there are too many different opinions and ideas on the Net hence cyberia’s excess of being
a public sphere. She argues that the discussion of the public sphere, which focuses on publicity, distracts us from the awareness of communicative capitalism and from actual physical efforts which make real politics (Dean, 2003).

Dean’s (2003, 2005, 2010) analysis of communicative capitalism undermining democracy fittingly explains the mechanisms of political economy and may be used to narrate many scholars’ concern with online entertainment distracting real civic participation, such as that included in Papacharissi’s (2010) critical account of digital citizens and Norris’ (2001) elaboration of the democratic divide. With citizens’ lack of practice in engaging in political discourse on the Internet, the capacity of citizens to hold democratic conversations – if they have the access to these conversations and have the will to do so – is also questionable.

The argument that political economy of the Internet hinders democracy is certainly important. Dean’s account of communicative capitalism provides a valuable theorisation of the domination effects that communication technologies themselves may entail. But contextualising the arguments in my research, I would like to argue for two points which seem to open up more helpful analyses.

First, the concern that citizens’ drive and willingness to participate in political discourse are diminished by other online consumption, as well as Dean’s argument that real political struggles are displaced by fantasies and technological fetish, may not show the whole picture of what is persistently influencing people’s drive to action in non-democratic societies. In countries such as China, the Internet is certainly hastening commercialisation and entertainment, and is utilised by the authorities for regulating the public. However, the inspiration of democratic ideas of citizenship that is emphasised by Rousseau (1762) is working simultaneously. In China where citizens’ democratic ideas are repressed over a long-term which has led to the lack of awareness of citizenship, communicative exchanges facilitated by the Internet entail durable inspiration of democratic ideas that cannot be offset by others. The regulation of the Internet by the authorities is consequently challenged by a culture of resistance. As I will introduce later, Yang’s (2009) study on Chinese online activism demonstrates the coevolution between the state’s control and citizens’ resistance. My research below will also suggest that other areas such as embodiment and emotions are somewhat outside the critique of political economy. In short, there are multiple effects operating on people’s drive to action and the hegemony between different levels of forces needs to be articulated.

Can we say a theory of dominance means everything and that resistance and other forces are always inferior? No. The anthropologist Scott (1985) in his investigation of peasants in a rural Malaysia village show that everyday resistance still existed even in the most repressed contexts. In the Chinese context, I need to analyse the fight for hegemony between different forces in a context where both control and the democratic inspiration of citizens are durable, expanding, increasing and changing. The focus is on political discourse and a sphere existing outside of state and market domination, which links to the ultimate meanings of democracy.
This also links to my second point that communication online may also promote political change through both immediate effects of events and long-term network establishment. This counters the view that political effects are necessarily caused by physical and organised action on the street and online communication does not cause political change, which is emphasised by Dean (2005). Dean asserts that ‘political change demands much, much more than networked communication’ but ‘the medium itself can and does provide a barrier against action on the ground’ (Dean, 2005, p.65). In the same vein, the issue of slacktivism and clicktivism has called the effectiveness and worthiness of online activism into question (Shulman, 2009; White, 2010; Morozov, 2009).

The argument is that participation in politics online through simply clicking the mouse and typing on the keyboard causes little challenge to authorities (Shulman, 2009). Morozov (2009) criticises slacktivism as a lazy form of action. White (2010) argues that clicktivism cheapens political engagement and crowds out all forms of activism, which are traditionally high risk and costly to organise (Olson, 1965). Slacktivism and clicktivism may result in long-term costs for the public sphere, as individuals may find their online comments ignored (Karpf, 2010). Surely, collective action on the street more explicitly demands political change by imposing pressure on the authorities, but an extensive number of examples of online voice triggering the response of the authorities and even policy change should not be ignored. Particularly in China where the authorities have never directly responded to the demands of the public, the collective voice online is sometimes too strong to be ignored and may enforce a mechanism of response (Zheng and Wu, 2005; Yu, 2006) – I will introduce online voice as an effective activity of resistance in China in Chapter 3.

Even if I follow Dean to take only offline action into account, online communication may promote the establishment of networks that will facilitate physical action. While Dean claims that the pleasures of the medium should not displace our attention from action on the ground, it seems similarly important for me to emphasise in my research that the carnival about the action on the street should not displace our attention to communication and on-going idea exchanges on the Internet that facilitate offline action. Melucci (1996a) argues that latent effects are generated during collective action, and work after the event to continually form a network which is capable of being mobilised to pursue further action when relevant issues emerge. It is reasonable to consider that in many online events, latent networks may be formed and will facilitate action on the street. Melucci (1996a) claims that the formation of this latent network is a cultural process interweaving with people’s daily life. Drawing on this view, political effects that may contribute to political change may be invisible, existing in cultural forms, together with the democratic inspiration penetrating people’s everyday life and thus only being seen in the long term. I will further discuss Melucci’s views of collective action in the next chapter. Furthermore, the effectiveness of online communications in mobilising and organising offline action has been celebrated (e.g. Gerbaudo, 2012). The instrumental and mobilising functions of the Internet in facilitating offline action through online communication will also be well demonstrated by my case study of the 2013 Southern Weekly Incident (as will be shown in Chapters 5, 6, and 7).
In summary, theories of the political economy of the Internet argue that the Internet, rather than promoting democracy, indeed hinders democracy in many ways due to politics and the market enhancing the power of those who dominate capital and resources. In the Chinese context, however, where there is no mechanism for legitimising and discussing democratic values (Zheng, 2007; Zhao, 2008), communication on the Internet entails significant political impacts both through submitting citizens’ demands to the authorities and enhancing democratic ideas of citizens. The function of communication exchanges on the Internet for facilitating and mobilising action on the ground is also evident. The domination underwritten by communicative capitalism and post-politics should be part of examining democracy. In my research, I treat the issues of political economy as an essential part of the general context for study and am careful in the examination of the barrier set by online communications against offline action with which Dean (2003, 2005) is concerned. But more importantly, I need to tackle the political impact of online communications from both political and cultural angles and examine the complexity of citizens’ political action both online and offline. I therefore focus on the mechanisms of action both online and offline and the dynamics between them. I highlight the mobilisation of communication technologies for facilitating offline action, which appears to be underestimated by Dean.

Still, the more fruitful exploration of the link between technologies and liberation or democratisation and the issue of domination of technology needs to be carefully contextualised (Schneider and Goto-Jones, 2014). In the particular Chinese context, power domination of technology is specifically concerned with state’s control. I must now examine the power configuration in China, in particular the relation between the state’s control and citizens’ resistance through the Internet. Following this I will be able to return to issues of the potential public sphere and the Internet in China, in the context of the political economy of digital capitalism, in order to form a crucial part of the theoretical framework for my thesis.

### 2.3. Studying the Internet and the public sphere in China

In the late 1990s, Barber (1998) introduces several scenarios for the future of technology. In contrast to a Panglossian view which envisions that technologies will naturally help realise a wholly benevolent and perfect technological society for democracy, pessimists emphasise that new technology may open a Pandora’s Box and enable the government to enhance control and repression (Barber, 1998). More specifically concerned with the regulation of cyberspace, Lessig (1999) argues that cyberspace can be a place of meticulously-planned oppressive control and it is becoming a highly regulable space where governments can control its underlying code and shape its legal environment. This view has certainly been proved by governments using increasingly sophisticated ways of tracking and blocking online content over the recent two decades. Internet surveillance and censorship imposed by governments also take globally networked forms and pose increasing threats to civil rights (Fuchs et al., 2013). To understand issues of power in Internet regulation I briefly need to touch on the relational perspective of power. I should note that power is a major conceptual issue and the relevant theories cannot be fully articulated in this paper. Lukes (2005) argues that power is not only exercised during decision-
making and through political agenda-setting for precluding certain decisions, but may also operate to manipulate people’s desire and thoughts in a subtle way. Foucault (2002) emphasises that power is relational in the sense that it is a mutual relation between agents and therefore all agents have the freedom to act. In this sense, resistance as a parallel force always exists in a power relationship. In China, the state using the Internet to enhance surveillance and censorship has arguably strengthened state power, while at the same time, meeting with ever more challenges of civil power facilitated through use of the Internet.

As a mutual relation, power in the Chinese context involves multiple agents – the party-state, the market, technology, and civil society. The Chinese Communist Party has maintained its single Party regulation since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. The Party’s strict censorship and state control have played a dominating and determining role in every field of Chinese society (Zheng and Wu, 2005; Yang, 2009), and with them, the Party has, at least on the surface, been able to maintain social stability so far. However, the regime has regularly been threatened by domestic collective action on different scales since it began (Zhao, 2008; Yang, 2009). With the openness and reform of a market-based economy starting in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the past 30 years have witnessed dramatic economic growth and a corresponding social transformation in China. An urban middle class has boomed, and a generation born during a period of relative openness and economic reform is growing (Zhao, 2008). During this period of transformation, Chinese society is full of contention from different aspects (Yang, 2009). China has grown a large number of Internet users. The use of the Internet on the one hand enable the Party to tighten authoritarian social control, on the other hand, contributes greatly to citizens’ civic participation (Zheng and Wu, 2005; Yang, 2009).

In this complex power relation, Party regulation is key, and civil power is seen as growing to counter Party regulation and in this way to shape the political ecology and culture in Chinese society. Following Foucault’s (2002) view of power as relational and involving resistance, I will first examine state power and its control of the Internet, and next I will examine citizens’ resistance through the Internet and the government’s adaptation to the counter effects of Internet control. The review of the power relation around the Internet is in line with Lukes’s (2005) view that power is not only explicit manipulation, but also is an influence on people’s desire and thoughts. Finally I will propose to study the formation of a public sphere in the context of a long-term transformation in China, a context where the concept of the public sphere may always be both invoked and refused at the same time.

2.3.1. State power and control of the Internet

In line with the tradition of political economy, Zhao’s (2008) examination of the communication system in China foregrounds the economic transformation accelerated by market reforms and global restoration during the past thirty years. She points out that the context for studying the dynamics of Chinese society is “the neoliberal revolution” and the forging of a “market state” in a global political economy’, as well as the domestic context of the Chinese state’s attempt to
construct a “socialism market economy” (p. 5). As Zhao (2008) argues, neoliberal ideas have been adopted since the early 1990s by a post-Mao leadership who addressed the crises of socialism and sought new ways to develop China while ensuring the Party’s control on power. For Zhao, neoliberalism is understood as a ‘governmentality’ that utilises ‘market knowledge and calculations’ for policy making and purposively promotes large scale social change to ensure ‘broader organization of politics and society’ (Harvey, 2005, Ong, 2006 and Robison, 2006, cited by Zhao, 2008, p.5). In brief, the defining characteristics of neoliberal governmentality are ‘the infiltration of market-driven truths and calculations into the domain of politics’ and these have been applied in China (Zhao, 2008, p.6).

Zhao (2008) explains that the Chinese party-state has set in motion a whole range of neoliberal practices to embrace a market economy, ‘from the privatization of state-owned enterprises to the seizure of farmlands, and from the commodification of a wide range of cultural forms to the destruction of the environmental commons’ (p. 6), and the dramatic change of economic landscape in the 21st century has caused ‘a fractured structure, acute divisions along class, rural/urban, ethnic, and regional cleavages, and heightened conflicts’ (p.7). For the Chinese state, society is ‘fluid, and indeed potentially explosive’, and needs intensified regulation to guarantee social stability for the development of the economy (Zhao, 2008, p.7). In this context, the usage of the Internet has been seen as a way of increasing the instability of Chinese society, whilst it has also been utilised by the state to intensify regulation since Hu Jintao’s leadership (2002-2012) (Zhao, 2008). Furthermore, widely existing inequality in the distribution of wealth and power is accelerated by the Internet which contributes to the digital divide. Zhao’s (2008) work shows a deep concern for the fractured and unequal nature of Chinese society caused by the accelerated market economy that is enhanced by the Internet.

Similarly emphasising state control, Zhou (2006) compares the development of telegraphy in China at the end of Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) with that of the Internet in the current China. Zhou’s (2006) study shows that the governments in these two periods are different in an international context in that the Qing court was weakened and fearful while the current PRC leadership is far more confident. This contrast leads to different attitudes and strategies adopted by the two governments – the Qing court sought ‘to ward off foreign control’ while the ‘PRC regime has adopted a more proactive policy’ (Zhou, 2006, p.232). The last years of Qing era saw the influx of Western ideas and the rise of nationalism. In this context, public telegrams were capable of promoting constitutionalism in China. However, contemporary China, under the Party’s policies which enforce political control and promote economic openness, entails more complicated political conflicts and cultural demands. This hinders a consensual desire for democratisation (Zhou, 2006).

Both Zhou (2006) and Zhao (2008) argue that the Chinese state has been proactively enforcing social and ideological manipulation, emphasising the influence of communication system and the
Internet on this process. The approach of a political economy analysis of the Party in China emphasises the paramount goal of the Party to maintain absolutely domination of Chinese society.

The concept of mediation can also help us understand the power of technologies that the Chinese government endeavours to manipulate. Mediation emphasises that the meanings of communication are shaped during the processes of communication (Silverstone, 2005). The social is mediated and in turn becomes a mediator (Livingstone, 2009). Another term remediation is also coined by Bolter and Grusin (1996) to define a characteristic of new media which endeavours to recreate the actual world and imitate other traditional media formats. In the sense that the social is mediated and remediated, the intention of the Chinese government to manipulate technologies for political control underpins Chinese Internet policies. Through many instruments, the Party implements comprehensive Internet regulation. Meng (2010) argues that mediation through the Chinese Internet should be considered through mechanisms of three levels – the institutional, the symbolic, and the individual. At the institutional level, we may study issues related to information infrastructure, copyright regulation, and censorship of the Internet. The symbolic level concerns the representation of communication on the Internet and its relation with the offline world. The individual level focuses on the ways in which the Internet mediates the lives of individuals such as the new forms of interaction and changes in discursive modes (Meng, 2010). I will now examine the mechanisms of control of the Internet on various levels. In this context I will then introduce Chinese citizens’ resistance of control of the Internet and the Party’s adaptation of control in the next section.

Since the emergence of the Internet in China, the state has emphasised the Internet as a new type of media and extended the existing framework of mass media control to the Internet (Yang, 2009). The Chinese government is highly vigilant of the possible political effects of the Internet. It has tried to control the technological progress of the Internet and at the same time enforced lawful and administrative regulations to prevent the Internet from distributing disgruntled emotions against the government (Zheng and Wu, 2005). Yang (2009) outlines three stages of Chinese Internet regulation. The first stage (1994-1999) highlighted the regulation of network security and Internet service provision. The second stage (2000-2002) moved to restrict both form and content through employing Internet filtering of sensitive content. The third stage (2003-present) marks the expansion of Internet regulation and control into the total strategies of ‘governance’ and ‘governmentality’ through the Party setting out formal and informal rules for regulating the cultural and social influence of the Internet (Yang, 2009, p.49). The past decade has seen state control of the Internet become more expansive, sophisticated, and hegemonic through the establishment of institutions, legal and technical instruments, and citizens’ self-discipline ethics. The mechanisms involve website blocking, regulations, surveillance, propaganda, imprisonment and proactive provision of discursive content (Zittrain and Edelman, 2003; Yang, 2009; Xiao, 2011).

The specific means of Chinese Internet control have been most discussed around the fundamental infrastructures of the Great Firewall and Golden Shield, which are built specifically
for regulation of the Internet. Both started in the 1990s, the former is used to block foreign websites and the latter is used for domestic surveillance and filtering. The Great Firewall guards the gateways through which foreign network content enters the country and detects and blocks harmful foreign content (Xiao, 2011). For example, the government used it to block Twitter (Facebook was blocked early on) following the 2009 Xinjiang riots and Bloomberg and the New York Times’ official websites after they exposed the wealth of Chinese leaders’ families in 2012. The Great Firewall is regarded as ‘the world’s most advanced national firewall’ and has evolved ‘from crudely blocking entire web domains (though it still does this in some cases) to blocking particular pages within websites’ (The Economist, 2013e, for more details see The Economist, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2013d). The Golden Shield effectively deletes and filters words such as dictatorship and truth (Zittrain and Edelman, 2003; Xiao, 2011). Studies show that censors rarely explicitly clarify what content would be banned (Zhang, 2006; Xiao, 2011). As the government controls the registration of Internet service providers, business operators are required to be responsible for the behaviour of their customers and thus are forced to implement censoring (Xiao, 2011).

Multiple levels of Party institutions form an overlapping nationwide system to govern Internet content. The CCP’s Central Propaganda Department (CPD) ensures that Internet content tows the line of media and cultural regulation. The State Council Information Office (SCIO) oversees all official and independent news-providing websites. Both the CPD and SCIO have municipal, provincial, and county divisions (Xiao, 2011). Censorship directives are frequently disseminated from the top levels of the CPD to the lower levels. Local CPD officials also sometimes issue their own censorship directives to ban media information which they regard as threatening authorities or they prefer to keep away from the public (Xiao, 2011). As Qiang (2011) found, business owners ‘use a combination of their own judgment and direct instructions from propaganda officials to determine what content to ban’ (p. 50).

Both the government and websites employ people (including Internet police, propaganda workers and in-house monitors at websites) to manually delete posts (Xiao, 2011; The Economist, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2013d, 2013e). It is reported that ‘more than 100 Chinese companies have made a total of at least 125 products for monitoring and filtering public opinion online’ (The Economist, 2013c).

Websites owners are regularly warned and websites can be shut down if they provide information which is labelled politically incorrect (Xiao, 2011). Website owners and users who express ideas that pose potential threats to the government may be arrested and prosecuted (Zheng and Wu, 2005). The Chinese government also frequently tightens the management of websites. For example, controls were significantly tightened during periods such the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, after 2009 Xinjiang uprising, and around June 4th each year, the anniversary of the Tiananmen protest (Qiang, 2011; CDT, 2014).
On Sina Weibo, the most popular web networking service in 2012, deletion is exercised to prevent certain information from spreading. It is also a means of send a warning from state surveillance to chill future discussion. Research on the deletion of Weibo posts conducted by Zhu et al. (2013) found that deletions on Weibo happen most frequently in the first hour after a post has been submitted. Zhu et al. observe that nearly 30% of the total deletions of original posts (not including reposts) occur within 5-30 minutes and nearly 90% of the deletions happen within the first 24 hours. The deletion of a sensitive post is later followed by the deletion of a chain of reposts. They found that deletion speed of particular posts is related to the sensitivity of the topics discussed. They also found that certain users (such as those who frequently post sensitive content) receive closer scrutiny (Zhu et al., 2013). Zhu et al. (2013, no pagination) observe that Weibo has different levels of filtering mechanisms including *explicit filtering* (Weibo will inform a sender that his/her post ‘cannot be released because of sensitive content’), *implicit filtering* (Weibo ‘suspends posts until they can be manually checked, telling the user that the delay is due to “server data synchronization.”’) and *camouflaged posts* (Weibo ‘makes it appear to a user that their post was successfully posted, but other users are not able to see the post. The poster receives no warning message in this case’).

Weibo posts have often been utilised by the authorities to support political prosecution. In May 2014, a well-known human rights lawyer Pu Zhiqiang was detained after he attended an event to commemorate the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen protest. Pu was held in detention for around 600 days before a trial was held in December 2015. Pu was accused of committing the crimes of *inciting ethnic hatred* and *picking quarrels and provoking trouble* on Weibo, through posting messages that questioned the authorities’ action in repressing regional uprising (BBC, 2015; The Initium, 2016). Pu was officially given three-year suspended sentence in December 2015 (Lu, 2015).

Government strategies for more direct engagement with public are also enforced. For example, we have seen *Internet commentators* (or the ‘Fifty Cent Party’\(^4\)) hired and paid by the government to directly intervene in online discussions. They join online debates by writing responses to posts and covertly guiding the direction of debates in accordance with propaganda principles (Bristow, 2008; Yang, 2009; CDT, 2010). Since 2007 a cartoon featuring two police officers occasionally pops up on Chinese Internet users’ screen, encouraging the public to report illegal online information to the authorities by following the links to the Internet Police section of the Public Security website (Xiao, 2011).

The Internet certainly is not only a field of censorship as just described, but also a field where citizens exercise resistance. Citizens’ resistance also forces the Party’s control of the Internet to evolve. I will introduce these dynamics in the next section.

\(^4\) Also called ‘Wu Mao Party’ in Chinese, referring to people who are hired by the Party to spread pro-Party ideologies and disturb confrontational discussion. It is said that they were paid fifty cent per post to intentionally direct online discussion.
2.3.2. Citizens’ resistance and the state’s adaptation of Internet control

Yang’s (2009) study of online activism in China shows that the Internet has been effectively adopted by citizens for activism through practices of rightful resistance, artful contention, and digital hidden transcripts. These three types of action capture the diverse analytical possibilities of understanding a folk culture which negotiates political control on the Chinese Internet. Now I follow these terms to examine the repertoire of citizens’ resistance.

Rightful resistance, as O’Brien and Li (2006) define, is a form of popular contention that normally combines ‘legal tactics with political pressure’ (p. 3) and ‘operates near the boundary of authorized channels’ (p. 2). Rightful resisters ‘normally frame their claims with reference to protections implied in ideologies or conferred by policy makers’ and rely on mobilising wide public support (O’Brien and Li, 2006, p.3). While O’Brien and Li’s (2006) study of rightful resistance in China provides a valuable account of resistance in rural China where ordinary citizens’ political resource is scarce, Benney (2007) extends this concept further to study right defence (Weiquan) as urban activities taken mainly by a middle class who have a higher level of education and technological expertise. Benney’s (2007) study shows a strong link between Internet usage and the modern version of right defence in China. The popularity of bulletin board systems (BBS) in the late 1990s enabled conversations about defence of human rights to unfold and since then activist networks for right defence have been formed and expanded (Yang, 2003; Benney, 2007). This is shown by the activists network who were actively engaged in both online and offline action in the Southern Weekly Incident (Chapters 5, 6, 7). It is reasonable to understand that in Benney’s (2007) account of right defence, Chinese urban citizens, who are equipped with some resources in new technologies, have stronger demands of citizenship than those in O’Brien and Li’s (2006) account. Yang’s (2009) account of rightful resistance on the Chinese Internet should also be understood as caused by and causing more demands for citizenship. As Yang (2009) argues, online rightful resistance refers to citizens’ online resort to lawful action which is non-disruptive but persuasive in promoting mass communication.

Online rightful resistance is well supported by artful contention which adopts artistic approaches to bypass censorship thus avoiding immediate repression (Yang, 2009). Qiang (2011) articulates the Chinese terms of shai (reveal, show off) and huo (fire, go viral) to narrate coded communication on the Chinese Internet. In the shai activities (e.g. shai salaries, shai holidays, shai babies, shai riches, shai corruption), citizens are willing to share their personal lives and opinions online. They promote a folk culture with a playful style which involves the creation of satire, jokes, songs, images, and other art forms on the Internet (Yang, 2009; Meng, 2010; Xiao, 2011). The huo processes are often initiated by unofficial news stories that are released online and are promptly promoted by citizens ridiculing the controversial characters in the stories to the extent that the topics go viral. Much of this type of artful contention may also be studied as the creation of hidden transcripts, which is described by Scott (1992) as the mocking and vengeful tone displayed off stage. Scott (1992) argues that subordinate groups create hidden transcripts that represent ‘a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant’, while the dominant
also develop hidden transcripts claiming ‘their rule that cannot be openly avowed’ (p. xii). Yang (2009) extends this concept to articulate digital hidden transcripts on the Chinese Internet which involve digital tactics.

Many Chinese citizens have learnt to use proxy servers and anti-blocking software to access information that has been censored. They may even rewrite computer programs to defuse the filtering system (Yang, 2009; Sullivan, 2012). News information on overseas websites is regularly accessed by activists who then distribute this information on Chinese online platforms (Xiao, 2011). Many activists also routinely access social media such as Facebook and Twitter for political interaction. In many cases in which websites are shut down by censors, activists manage to open new ones under new guises (Sullivan, 2012). Linguistic tactics such as separating words and using homophony have been commonly adopted by Chinese citizens’ daily use of the Internet and proved to be effective in circumventing censorship in many cases (Yang, 2009; Meng, 2010; Sullivan, 2012, 2014). Furthermore, microblogging has enabled citizens to publicise discontent with various issues faster and thus diffusing certain information before deletion is imposed (Yang, 2009; Sullivan, 2014). Moreover, the various tactics I have introduced so far are usually adopted together in particular cases. A brief example will help explain this.

In September 2014, tens of thousands Hong Kong citizens held mass sit-ins to protest against the Chinese Communist Party’s proposed reforms of the Hong Kong electoral system and to demand an universal suffrage (popularly referred to as Umbrella Revolution or Occupy Central Movement). Mainland Chinese citizens were struggling to get information and discuss the unrest. The data collected by Weiboscope (operated by the Journalism and Media Studies Centre at The University of Hong Kong) shows that post deletion was tremendously increased in this period. The number of posts deleted was more than five times normal levels on the most tumultuous day of 28 September (The Economist, 2014). However, analysis also shows that some subtler messages managed to get around the censors for a certain period of time and were reposted before the messages were deleted. Some other messages managed to survive online by being even more indirect such as in the form of a satirical photo (The Economist, 2014). This suggests that even in moments of intensified censorship, the Party’s censoring may not always be efficient enough to control online information during sensitive events.

The restriction of information flow also causes counterproductive effects for the Internet economy. Yang (2009) points out that despite the concern for the subversive effects of the Internet, Chinese leaders’ enthusiasm for the economic benefits of the Internet has never diminished. The multidimensional social conditions rooted in state power, social culture, the market, civil organisations and online communities, and transnational effects continuously enhance the power of resistance and reshape the balance between the state’s control and citizens’ resistance. Yang (2009) therefore develops a ‘multi-interactionism model’ to unpack the relationship between online activism and multidimensional social conditions (p. 7). As Yang (2009, p.9–10) puts it,
State power constrains the forms and issues of contention, but instead of preventing it from happening, it forces activists to be more creative and artful. Culture, understood as symbolic forms and practices, informs and constitutes online contention through the tradition and innovation of rituals and genres of contention. Business interests favour contention despite the dangers of manipulation. Civic organizations and online communities, the main force of civil society, strategically use the Internet for social change. Transnationalization expands the scale and radicalises the forms of online activism. All this adds up to a complex picture of online activism as a central locus of social conflict and social transformation in contemporary China.

Challenged by the resistance of Internet users and the counterproductive effects caused by Internet control, the Chinese government has been adjusting Internet regulation over many years. A strategy of both developing and controlling the Internet has been revealed by many scholars, who indicate that the Chinese government has contradictory goals of both promoting an Internet economy and controlling political information on the Internet (Zheng and Wu, 2005; Zhang, 2006; Yang, 2009; MacKinnon, 2011; Sullivan, 2014). Zhang’s (2006) interviews with Chinese Internet policymakers, from an insider’s perspective, reveal that the government has a ‘push-and-control plan’ which is implemented through a ‘two-hand strategy’ – promotion on the one hand, and control on the other (p. 279). Sullivan (2014) points out that this strategy is consistent with the system of ‘consultative Leninism’ that the party has adopted since the late 1990s, in which the primary concern is the sustainability of Party rule (p. 30).

This dual goal requires an ongoing adaptation in the implementation of selective control (Zheng and Wu, 2005; Yang, 2009; The Economist, 2013b). Rather than enforcing a total control, the Chinese government ‘allows limited information liberalization, but once Internet users exceed that limit, governmental intervention will come to “correct” online behaviour’ (Zheng and Wu, 2005, p.521). King et al.’s (2013) study on Chinese censorship based on participation and systematic analysis conducted in 2013 provides unambiguous evidence suggesting that criticism of the state, leaders, and their policies can be routinely published on Chinese Internet, but posts with collective action potential (in physical offline locations) are much more likely to be censored. Sullivan (2014) argues that the detention of online activists effectively keeps online opinion divided, and in this way, the government is efficient in ‘keeping different groups in ignorance of one another’ thus preventing the formation of ‘cross-region, cross-class coalition’ that can challenge the Party’s stability (p. 31). As the 2009 Xinjiang unrest demonstrated, the government can control technological infrastructure to totally deny or selectively limit access to the Internet from a particular region (Sullivan, 2014).

More proactive and strategic approaches to online posts have been taken by the government. Sullivan (2014) argues that the Chinese government uses Weibo messages to ‘adapt its policies, inform official media or identify and neutralize potential threats’ (p. 31). The government has also
been setting the agenda for propaganda on the Internet through the promotion of nationalism and patriotism (Sullivan, 2014). The use of online commentators (Fifty Cent Party) to manipulate online opinions has significantly increased over recent years (Sullivan, 2014).

The regulation of Weibo posting has been reported to be significantly tightened after Southern Weekly Incident in January, 2013. During 2013, Chinese citizens witnessed a series of crackdowns and high-profile arrests of online activists. In September 2013, China’s Supreme Court announced that any online rumour viewed more than 5000 times, or reposted more than 500 times can result in up to three years in jail for its original author, with a special exemption for state-owned news outlets (Malcolm, 2013). In this way, the government unveiled tough measures to stop the spread of what they regard as irresponsible rumours (Reuters, 2013).

A previous journalist and current scholar Qian Gang (2014) wrote that Xi Jinping’s leadership (2012 to present) has so far involved significantly tightened control over civil action. As Qian reveals, a central organisation specialising in ensuring the security of information and the Internet was established with Xi himself as the leader. ‘Civil society’ and ‘universal values’ became prohibited political words. Yet, civil power has seen the strengthening cooperation with information technology, market economy, and media. As Qian sees it, the symbiosis of media and civil society facilitated by the Internet is being formed and is becoming a strong coalition confronting political power.

Both the state’s control of the Internet and citizens’ resistance are evolving over time. Chinese citizens’ various skills for circumventing censorship were developed in a long-term process in which Internet regulation by the state has also become more sophisticated. The increasingly tightened control means destructive expression online is tolerated less and less and will lead to higher risks. The creative and artful ways of expression, though likely to be very emotional, were also citizens’ strategies that potentially protect them from severe expression that might lead to accusations of being disruptive. Yang’s (2009) conceptualisation of co-evolution, which describes the dynamics between the state’s Internet control and citizens’ online contention as co-evolutionary, is pertinent. The dynamics are not simply one forcing and the other being forced. It is through this co-evolution in institutional and communicative domains, and on both the structural and interactive levels, that the negotiation between the state and citizens is constantly maintained.

Despite analysis from various angles being carried out to demonstrate the existence of the authoritarian power in China, a public space brought about by the Internet is new in China and the possibilities for democratisation of China seem unprecedented. The various means of censorship circumvention enable Chinese citizens to actively discuss public affairs and exercise citizenship (Yu, 2006). The concept of the public sphere becomes ever more prominent in studying digital China as it focuses on the communication between citizens and foregrounds state-society relations. I will discuss the study of the public sphere ‘in formation’ in China in the next section.
2.3.3. Studying the formation of the public sphere in China

While scholars studying western societies are examining whether the Internet can help revive the public sphere, scholars in the Chinese context show passion for discussing the possibilities for creating something like a public sphere as a democratic social basis in China via the use of the Internet. With the intention of achieving a better grip of how the public sphere may be discussed in the Chinese context and what role the Internet may play here, I review some early scholarship before proposing how I will study the formation of the public sphere in contemporary China.

In China studies, the concept of the public sphere was initially used by Calhoun (1989) in a study of the 1989 Tiananmen student movement. Calhoun (1989) argues that the rise of the 1989 student movement and the central event of the June 4th Tiananmen student protest (known as the June Fourth Incident) was in part an attempt to establish a ‘nascent public sphere’ which was ‘a realm of political discourse outside the control of the state’ (p. 55). The Great Cultural Revolution and its aftermath had caused a severe ‘cultural crisis’ (Calhoun, 1989, p.62). As Calhoun (1989) explains, Chinese society at this time was greatly mobilised to participate in a cultural world that was increasingly international. The discussion of issues such as from communism to democracy, inspired by international culture, helped shape the formation of China’s intellectual class. A model of political discourse was desired by thoughtful Chinese people in a China of modernity (Calhoun, 1989). During the movement, students practised the public sphere through meeting in small groups for discussion, organising large audiences for speeches, and forming a representative council for debating their collective strategies and carrying out self-government (Calhoun, 1989; Shen, 1990). Evidently, the low rate of citizens’ participation and the state’s strict control of information dissemination effectively restricted the exercise of public discourses (Calhoun, 1989). Calhoun’s account of the public sphere in the 1989 student movement does not clearly suggest a public sphere was ‘in formation’, but it is suggestive of such initiatives in Chinese society. It reveals the cultural environment which was generating the desire of Chinese intellectuals to establish a public sphere.

In a 1993 symposium entitled “public sphere”/“civil society” in China?, the debate on the utility of the concept of the public sphere in studying China was introduced. Acknowledging the absence of the public sphere in Habermas’s sense in Chinese history, some scholars adjusted the architecture and the norms of the concept for practical application and claim to have found certain public spheres in late-imperial China (mainly Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and Qing Dynasty (1644-1912)).

Rankin (1993) argues that ‘from the late Ming onward there was a continuous, slowly developing, public sphere in China involving both state and social power’ (p. 158). Her claim is based on her definition of the public sphere as ‘intermediate arenas in which open, public initiatives are undertaken by both officials and the populace’ and thus requiring ‘a state presence, a degree of autonomous or voluntary social involvement, some social impact on policy, and a legitimizing idea of the common good’ (p. 160). She found ‘local public spheres’ or ‘managerial public spheres’
consisting of local elites who ran 'local affairs outside of bureaucratic frameworks' for the common good of the area (p. 161). Therefore, the central function of these public spheres was management rather than open public discussion (Rankin, 1993).

It may be reasonable to question whether such replacement of the public sphere by the local and managerial public spheres goes too far away from the original principles of the concept, to the extent that the value of applying the concept is in doubt. As Huang (1993) points out, 'When we substitute segmented and largely rural local communities for Habermas's integrated and urban public sphere, as Rankin tries to do, just what is left of the concept of public sphere to warrant retention of the term?' (p.222). The main problem is that there is an assumption (particularly in European societies) that the public sphere implies the negotiation between the authorities and social interests, and a formal social institution must be established in order to limit the power of state-authorities. However, in Rankin’s account, the Chinese officials and the elites active in local public spheres had relations of ‘affinities’ which were ‘generally consensual rather than confrontational’ (Rankin, 1993, p.163). As Rankin herself states, those elites ‘did not try to define rights against the state or set formal limits on state power’, thus the local public spheres had ‘little direct effect on national policy’ (p. 162-163). To me, this affinity between Chinese officials and the local public spheres undermines the key principle of a public sphere such as the negotiation between state and society.

Huang (1993) suggests employing ‘a trinary conception’ of the public sphere which allows ‘a third space' to exist between state and society (p. 216). Huang claims that the third realm allows both the state and society to participate and was established in a context of the twin processes of ‘modern societal integration and modern statemaking' in the late Qing (1644-1912) and Republican China (1912-1949) (Huang, 1993, p.231). Borrowing Habermas’s concepts of ‘state-ification’ and ‘societalization’, Huang (1993) expands his analyses to argue that the period after Republican China is ‘mainly state-ification of the third realm’ and the period beginning from the late 1970s is ‘much societalization’ and ‘de-state-ification of that realm’ (p. 234).

Both Rankin (1993) and Huang (1993) adapt Habermas’s notion to the reality of China. They both emphasise the social processes in which the state and society in China became merged. However much ‘public sphere-ness’ can be identified in Chinese history, it is fair to say that the scholarship of the retrospective exploration produces a narrative suggesting the existence of a deep cultural desire and social tendency for the establishment of a public sphere in China. Yet, the public sphere has yet to be established.

With Internet use in China during the past three decades dramatically increasing, the discussion about the public sphere in China has become refashioned. The idea of maintaining a broad conception of the public sphere rather than mechanically borrowing Habermas’s theory is commonly accepted in order to study various types of public spheres in question. For example, Yang and Calhoun (2007), in studying environmental discourse in China, adopt a broad conceptualisation of the public sphere as 'space for public discourse and communication' and
claim the emergence of a green public sphere in China for contesting environmental issues (p. 214). As I have argued, state control of the Internet and citizens’ resistance of regulation together create the tension that becomes one of the most defining characteristics of Chinese Internet culture. On the one hand, the strict censorship imposed on Chinese newspapers and broadcasters indicates potential for the Internet to become a popular alternative information source and interactive platform. On the other hand, restrictions on the Internet creates obstacles that may complicate and delay the Internet fulfilling its potential to become a public sphere. Yet, the democratic progress in this perspective should be recognised.

The Chinese public sphere facilitated by the Internet should therefore be studied as being both ‘in formation’ and ‘in the making’ rather than ‘in existence’. This is in line with the understanding of the long-term transformation of Chinese society. This is a process where the concept of the public sphere may always be both invoked and refused at the same time. Remarkable social transformation in China has been observed during the past 30 years and will arguably continue to be seen (Tai, 2006; Shirk, 2010). Power relations between politics, market economy, and civil society in China are dynamic and continuously changing. The negotiation between the state and citizens is constantly taking place. The Internet increasingly challenges people’s ideological beliefs by providing information for rethinking the world and suggesting a more democratic and liberal western culture. A culture of resistance is promoted by Internet activities but not limited to online practice. As Yang (2009) argues, China is in an age of contention. Many cases of new citizen activism are a reflection of the fractured reality of Chinese modernity with its accompanying identity crisis (Zhao, 2008). On the one hand, traditional issues such as those rooted in material grievance concerning workers’ wages and unfair labour exploitation are continually sparking social movements. On the other hand, new issues – ranging from ‘protests about land loss to pension, property rights, consumer rights, popular nationalism, animal rights, pollution, migrant labor, HIV/AIDS, and discrimination against hepatitis-B carriers’ (Yang, 2009, p.40) – can widely be discovered in China in the past two decades. Different forms of contention on the Internet have been shaping a distinct modern Chinese culture.

Ultimately, the social shaping of technology and technological empowerment anticipate changes taking place during a long-term process. The examination of them requires guarded optimism which adopts both hope and caution in examining the assistance of technology in facilitating deliberative political discourse (Barber, 1998). Democratisation is a process involving the development of many elements such as participation, representation, deliberation, accountability, transparency, and so on (Zheng and Wu, 2005). Yang (2009) follows Raymond Williams’s (1977) theories of the structures of feeling to argue for the significance of capturing the immediate living presence in China. He asserts that we are blessed with the opportunity of observing, feeling and thinking about online activism when it is still a new social formation in the making (Yang, 2009). I am inspired by the idea that by capturing contextual meanings in such a living presence it may be possible to indicate emerging structures of feeling. My research does not assume that the Internet has democratised or will inevitably democratise China, but endeavours to provide an in-
depth insight into the role played by the Internet in a long-term democratic development in China, which is a process in which the concept of the public sphere may be both invoked and refused.

Studying the public sphere as part of the long-term social transformation in China means taking into account the ever-changing political and cultural conditions in China. The authoritarian control of information flow and public political contestation in China should be studied in a context in which citizens are not powerless and the state’s control and citizens’ resistance are co-evolutionary. The continuous negotiation between the state and citizens is constantly influencing the formation of a possible public sphere in China. Generally, the control of information flow by the state, the strategies and willingness of political participation by the citizens, the mutual negotiation between powers from both sides, and the more abstract civil culture, which affect the formation of an online public sphere, are in the process of forming, struggling, changing, and becoming. The focus of my study is on the change brought about by the Internet through offering information and mobilising and facilitating discussion, despite strict control and censorship imposed by the state. Furthermore, the level to which the online space must develop in the perspective of the public sphere before we call it a public sphere is another issue. It may also be reasonable to assume that a characteristic of China is that it is likely to always have a public sphere ‘in formation’, invoking and resisting the concept at the same time. This project would like to keep a record of the process of this development. In short, it is about the forming of a public sphere in China rather than a formed model of it. However long it may take until we can observe the establishment of a certain form of the public sphere, it is important to acknowledge that transformation is taking place in the forming stream of a public sphere, a democratic culture in China.

The public sphere ‘in formation’ can also be understood as a social movement that is constantly triggered by a constellation of political events, in the sense that such events set agendas for discussion and trigger mass mobilisation. The emotions triggered by people’s past experience work powerfully to serve the mobilisation of online discussion. My research topic accordingly needs to be materialised into specific issues emerging from particular social events. In the information age, the frequency of episodes of collective action happening in China seems unprecedented to many. The study of the formation of the public sphere seeks to present how this is happening, examine the complexity, and explore the possibility and constraints. Furthermore, as Zheng (2007) argues, both the state and society need to be disaggregated because they both are composed of multiple blocks such as individual leaders, bureaucracies, levels of government, and different but inter-related social forces. This disaggregation is also necessary and possible to be explored through cases of collective action where multiple levels of conflicts are concentrated.
Chapter 3 Collective action and embodiment in digital China

A key dimension of my research lies in the idea of examining the public sphere ‘in formation’ to understand digital China. The public sphere ‘in formation’ is best understood through collective action as collective action in China indicates connectivity between Chinese people in contesting public issues. In studying collective action, multiple blocks of the state and society, such as individual leaders, bureaucracies, levels of government, and different but inter-related social forces, and the meanings of people’s action will be examined. The focal question is how actors (and we) make sense of their action (Crossley, 2002). In this chapter, I examine the ways of studying collective action in digital China, focusing on the mechanism of collective action in the making.

In contemporary China, where public discussion about political issues is often strictly controlled by the state and carefully avoided by Chinese citizens, it is difficult for radical and organised movements to unfold on the street. However, historical cases show that the lack of public political discourse may in some way contribute to the appearance of radical action at particular times, in the sense that people participate in action to pursue political expression and collective action works as a compensation for the lack of institutional mechanisms for expressing opinions.

For example, the May Fourth Movement in 1919 was a national anti-imperialist movement initiated by student demonstrations in Beijing on 4th May, speaking for the ideals of science and democracy. It began as a demonstration protesting China’s treatment in the Paris Peace Conference and the Chinese government’s weak response to foreign powers, but evolved to promoting political and cultural awakening. It had profound impacts on the Enlightenment in Chinese society and marked the first of a series of movements to end Feudalism and imperial rule in China (Schwarcz, 1986). Rankin (1993) argues that mass demonstrations from the May Fourth movement onward during the Republic China (1912-1949) ‘became a fixture of the public sphere’ in the sense that these mobilisations ‘served to bring together diverse groups, publicize causes, and put pressure on governments’ (p. 176), though political coalitions formed during and after these demonstrations in Republic China suffered from unsustainability in limiting state power. The compensational effects may also be understood from the angle that participants feel relatively safe under the protection of anonymity in a crowd (Rankin, 1993), compared to openly expressing political opinions. Under PRC’s regime since 1949, national movements such as the 1978-1979 Democracy Wall movement and the 1989 student movement mostly unfolded with the articulation of contested ethos, as shown by Calhoun’s (1989) account of the 1989 student movement. The 1989 student movement and the fall of Eastern European communism and the Soviet Union alerted the Chinese Communist Party to increase the level of control on pro-democracy movements, most effectively through the entire propaganda apparatus that operated

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5 The 1978-1979 movement was symbolised by a 200-yard brick wall in central Beijing where people posted their big- and small character posters. Demanding democracy was the key theme of the movement (Zhao, Y. 2001).
a total management of media (Y. Zhao, 2001; 2008). Through media propaganda, authorities warn Chinese citizens of the high risk of participating in mass incidents, which refer to street assemblies of various forms ranging from public speeches to political protests (Freeman, 2010; Ran, 2011).

The Internet has evidently brought about new prospects for collective action in both democratic and authoritarian countries. In the global context, the effects of the Internet on mobilising social movements have been observed through the establishment of action networks, the mobilisation of emotions in action, and the facilitation of movement organising (Gerbaudo, 2012). Earl and Kimport (2011) argue that the Internet lowers the barriers to participation in activism. They regard the role played by the Internet in activism that is mainly online as facilitating e-tactics or e-movements, while in those cases where people online are mobilised to the street as facilitating e-mobilisation. Gerbaudo’s (2012) study of the Egyptian uprising, the Spanish indignados and the Occupy movement shows that even in countries where control and repression by the authorities are intensively carried out, new social networks established online have helped the implementation of social movements, through the Internet playing the role of a ‘choreography of assembly’, mobilising emotions and organising coherent movements (Gerbaudo, 2012, p.5).

In China, the affordances of the Internet in reducing the cost and decreasing the needs of physical gathering in activism participation, discussed by Earl and Kimport (2011), are similarly demonstrated. The use of the Internet helps maintain, to a greater degree, the illusion of anonymity that Rankin (1993) discovers. The past two decades in China have seen Chinese citizens pursuing online activism as the prominent form of political resistance (Yang, 2009). Events that involve issues of social unfairness, injustice, corruption and power abuse often trigger popular online discourse, hence the new term mass online incidents or Internet mass incident, drawing upon the previous term mass incidents, being adopted by the state in policies of controlling online activism (Yang, 2009; Ren, 2011). Though Internet use in activism in China on a certain level facilitates similar mechanisms discovered in the global context, it however shows a distinct pattern in cases involving mass offline action, as I explain below.

Theoretically, there is no shortage of large-scale political collective action in China – recent and ongoing cases include the New Citizens’ Movement and the Southern Street Movement. However, this type of collective democratic action in digital China follows an unfolding trajectory that is extremely challenging to observe for study in the sense that they are composed by instant and dispersed action and are efficiently repressed once they emerge. There are also increasing

6 The New Citizens’ Movement was initiated by a civil rights group led by the civil rights lawyer Xu Zhiyong (许志永) in 2010. It is a collection of civil rights activities from 2010 to 2013 in mainland China intending to facilitate a peaceful transition of the current political system towards constitutionalism and to promote civil society in China.

7 The Southern Street Movement was initiated in August 2011. It involves ongoing actions of petitioners holding banners or signs to protest against injustice or forced demolitions in main southern cities such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen.
numbers of citizens’ offline protests focusing on environmental and habitat issues in China but they tend to adopt an apolitical approach. In general, the type of collective democratic action, which contests political issues and involves both online and street action are rarely explored by researchers. Briefly, they present peculiar action dynamics that are, to a great extent, determined by sensitivity to organising and institutionalising movements in China, and contrast with the large-scale, sustained, collective format of the Arab Spring, los indignados in Spain, and the Occupy Wall Street movements. My research seeks to develop the body of literature on Chinese democratic action that involves both online and offline collective action. Through the case study of the Southern Weekly Incident conducted in depth, my research endeavours to reveal the representative meanings of what is perversely taking place in a Chinese society that is increasingly modernised and digitalised.

I adopt the term collective action rather than social movement for my research, endeavouring to avoid controversies in terms of movement scale and effects, though the analysis of collective action rides on theories of social movement. Collective action is conceptualised by some scholars as a core component of social movements (DellaPorta and Diani, 1999; Touraine, 2004). Touraine (2004) argues that the notion of social movements is better applied to a collective action that ‘challenges a mode of generalized social domination’ (p. 718). The complexity of the definition of social movement is explored by Crossley (2002), who argues that ways of defining social movements beg more questions of other terms such as collective and protest. Most importantly, given the nascent forms of popular political action in China and the degree to which action is repressed by authoritarian power, Yang (2009) notes that it is not entirely appropriate, even in discussing the 1989 student movement, to think of fully formed social movements in China such as those like the Green movement or second wave feminism in the West. The concept of collective action is more helpful as it emphasises the key dynamic of ‘collectivity’ of action in which the facilitation by the Internet figures prominently. This also allows a connection to the idea of the public sphere ‘in formation’ through collective action, without having to assert the existence of large scale movements.

Melucci (1996a) defines collective action as ‘a set of social practices (i) involving simultaneously a number of individuals or groups, (ii) exhibiting similar morphological characteristics in contiguity of time and space, (iii) implying a social field of relationships and (iv) the capacity of the people involved of making sense of what they are doing’ (p. 20). He identifies several forms of collective action such as social movements, competition, deviance, cooperation, rituals, and so on. I will focus on collective action particularly in relation to democratisation and the formation of a public sphere.

The case study of the 2013 Southern Weekly Incident (Chapter 5, 6, 7) presented in this research is meaningful for understanding collective action in China in the sense that, as an event focusing on ideological issues in China, the incident went beyond the scope of online e-tactics or e-movements to include offline action at scale thus challenging the limit of collective democratic
action in current China. More importantly, as I will discuss, the case demonstrates a form of online and offline action being seemingly segmented by different groups, which reveals distinctive dynamics of Chinese collective action. In this sense the dynamics presented here are also distinct from e-mobilisation which emphasises the use of the Internet for turning people from the Internet onto the street.

In this chapter, I will follow Melucci and other scholars’ works to articulate ways of studying the forming system of collective action, focusing on emotions as essential mechanism of mobilisation. I then study the concept of embodiment to examine the ways of understanding the mechanism of mobilisation in the context of connective action as a logic in digital age. Finally, I explore approaches to understanding collective action in China, through respectively articulating online action and the radicalisation of action in China, and tackling the complex ideologies and everyday resistance in Chinese society.

3.1. Forming collective action: understanding emotions in action

Making sense of collective action has to ride on the theories of social movement. The theories of social movement, as aptly summarised by many scholars (e.g. DellaPorta and Diani, 1999; Crossley, 2002; McDonald, 2006), suggests a historical distinction between American and European schools of analysis. While the American tradition emphasises more empirical and process-oriented framing in analysing a vast range of movements, the European tradition tries to make sense of movements by asking about the conflicts existing in particular times and societies that generate action (Crossley, 2002). The theory of new social movements, which becomes popular in the European literature, again, attempts to identify social conflicts in the new era (Crossley, 2002). Without delving into too much detail about the conflicting theories of social movement, I follow Melucci and others to articulate the sociological and cultural key to studying collective action in China.

Melucci’s works (1989, 1996a, 1996b), departing from both the focus on social conflicts that generate movements and the rational and instrumental framing of movements, emphasise interior dynamics of the forming of action. Specifically, Melucci contests the ideas of drawing much attention to ‘the visible and measurable features of collective action – such as their relationship with political systems and their effects on politics’, and emphasises that attention should be given to ‘the production of cultural codes’ within action groups (Melucci, 1996a, p.26). He argues that a movement should not be perceived as a self-consistent unity. Instead, the forming of the movement involves a set of ‘heterogeneous and fragmented phenomena’ which ‘internally contain a multitude of differentiated meanings, forms of action, and modes of organization’ (1996a, p.13), and in short, a movement is ‘the outcome of exchanges, negotiations, decisions, and conflicts among actors’ (1996a, p.4). Ultimately, Melucci approaches collective action by perceiving the role of collective action to be the key constituent of popular politics that is sustained through latent effects between actions and is embedded in everyday life, rather than merely radical action that is unsustainable. For this reason, he argues for the need to capture the ‘action systems in action’
in understanding collective action (1989, p.235). In the same vein, Laclau (2005) emphasises that the subject people does not pre-exist as an actor but is turned into an actor through pro-active discursive processes. Precisely, it is the process of the production of cultural codes and the forming systems in which people are mobilised that studies of collective action should focus on.

Melucci’s argument that latent networks are formed between actions is crucial in understanding people’s political engagement on a daily basis when action opportunities are low. This view opens up the arguments about network in social movement theory and raises questions regarding collective identities. Regardless of the network argument (for a summary see Crossley, 2002), I believe that examining the solidarity and ethos established within groups is significant in understanding the meanings of collective action. Della Porta and Diani (1999) emphasise that ‘social relationships and feelings of solidarity and of collective belonging’ are factors that make the mobilisation of a movement possible (p. 29). The examination of social effects (e.g. particular change of social conditions) on people’s action has to be understood by examining whether external force has made it easier to develop the interpersonal solidarity between actors (DellaPorta and Diani, 1999). Jasper (1998) argues that emotions during action work powerfully as reciprocal and shared emotions. The former type is generated by the ties of solidarity and loyalty that are embedded in interpersonal relationships between participants. The latter comes from the group as a whole towards outside objects, for example, outrage over government policies. These two types of emotions intertwine and are mutually affected within a movement, and together they create the pleasure of acting with each other as well as the pride and fulfilment of being part of a collective community confronting the outsiders. A self-reflection on identities may powerfully facilitate mobilisation. Crossley and Ibrahim’s (2012) study on student activism suggests that student activists gain ethical or symbolic rewards such as the sense of identity, ingroup status, and pleasure. These incentives are realised in a network environment, in the sense that the meanings and values of activism, and the identity felt by one, are commonly recognised by the network of others (Crossley and Ibrahim, 2012).

The ideas of focusing on the forming system and cultural codes, dynamics, interpersonal solidarity, and collective identities to study collective action are key for my research, which seeks to explore the mechanisms and meanings of the actions of Chinese citizens. Doubtless, social conflicts, in particular the state’s suppression of citizens’ demands, to a great extent contribute to the mobilisation of many cases of collective action in China. Yet, how Chinese citizens really make sense of their action has to be examined through their exchanges and sharing of cultural understanding of particular social conflicts. It is crucial not to be overwhelmed by the external stimulus of action and forget the internal and interactional mechanisms such as the establishment of mutual recognitions and collective identities that actually mobilise action. Drawing on this view, I specifically focus on emotions to address the links between individuals. Among various types of personal drives existing in action, emotions are elementary, underwriting intentions and cognitions in action, and are closely linked to the mechanism of embodiment discussed in the next section.
Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2001) argue that emotions are ‘like an unseen lens that colors all our thoughts, actions, perceptions, and judgments’ and partially responsible for connecting human beings to each other and to the surrounding world (p. 10), hence the need to examine the interaction of emotions with other cultural, organisational, and strategic dynamics in action. As they review, traditional studies on emotions in protests portray individual emotions as either the responses to personal psychological problems or crowd effects that are mysteriously passed from the crowds to individuals (Blumer, 1939; Miller and Dollard, 1941; Lasswell, 1930, 1948; Hoffer, 1951, cited by Goodwin et al., 2001). Protesters are either compelled to action by their inner demons or driven by crowd forces that are out of their control, and therefore participants in protests were excluded from rational agents with meaningful action (Goodwin et al., 2001). In the resource-mobilisation paradigm of movements which focuses on structural, rationalist, and organisational perspectives in movements, emotions are again treated as being incompatible with rational action (Goodwin et al., 2001). They critique these approaches in that they restrict the examination of the relationship between individuals and society. They forcefully point out that emotions ‘accompany rational acts as fully as irrational ones, positive experiences as much as negative ones’ (Goodwin et al., 2001, p.9), and emotions make cognitions ‘meaningful or powerful to people’ (p. 15). Barker (2001) similarly asserts that emotions and cognitions are ‘inseparable aspects of each other’ as there are ‘no emotions without ideas’ and ‘no ideas without emotions’ (p. 176). Drawing on these views, I treat emotions as part of culture and strive for a complex account of how emotions are developed, as opposed to simply treating them as irrational reactions. To do so, emotions are studied as associated with the social and cultural soil where people make sense of their action.

Associating emotions with the social and cultural implies that emotions should be understood through examining the social settings that stimulate individuals’ inner needs. As a starting point for understanding emotions in social contexts, I would like to, again, cite Melucci’s (1996b) insight here, as his study on the self in contemporary societies provides a philosophical and cultural point of view addressing people’s desire, anticipation, and motivation for action. Melucci (1996b) argues that there is always a division between what he calls ‘interior times’ (inner times) – ‘the times of desire and of dreaming, of the affections and the emotions’ – and ‘outer times’ (social times) – the times ‘measured by social rules’ (p. 14). With the evolution of information technologies being dramatically accelerated in the past few decades, the outer times are inexhaustibly and endlessly extending, and as a consequence, the physical distance between people is reduced and people are constantly exposed to the multiplicity of social sectors within a concentrated time. Melucci (1996b) argues that the division between the outer times and the inner times has been fast expanded to such an extent that integration between them can no longer be achieved. As he puts it, individuals have to constantly change social identities and act on multiple roles following social rules that are specific to each of the various social domains (Melucci, 1996b). Yet, people have the central task to ask who they are, thus probing the notion of identity. The rational goes like this: people have insufficient time to make necessary choices and act perfectly on various roles, hence the desire to extend their inner times, and therefore various forms of rituals such as social
gatherings, varied from art performance to political protests are pursued to allow the ‘breaking with everyday order’ and thus expanding ‘subjective time’ and giving ‘access to new dimensions of the self’ (Melucci, 1996b, p.15). Engaging in collective action is meaningful also because people need to ‘be reintegrated into the communicative networks’ in order to relate with others to recognise their needs and know who they are (Melucci, 1996b, p.26). Overall, people in mass societies need to deny fragmented ways of life and these needs are ‘directed towards the polis’ when they ‘participate in civil life’ (Melucci, 1996b, p.27).

There are evidently various types of emotions in movements. To me, it seems more meaningful to discuss them in the context of high-risk movements which will allow me to address the particularity in China. In high-risk movements where brutal repression from the authorities is enforced on participants, participation implies potential risks such as losing jobs, violent reprisals, threat against participants’ families, and so on. Emotional mobilisation in high-risk movements may appear to be more complicated compared to that in less risky contexts, in the sense that fearful emotions towards potential danger also need to be overcome or mitigated. The question of how encouraging emotions (e.g. outrage, indignation, excitement, etc.) surpass or help mitigate fearful emotions during action mobilisation (though these cannot be easily measured) should always be addressed in order to provide a descriptive and sensible account.

Through the examination of Salvadoran peasants’ participation in enduring social movement against political and economic exclusion, Wood (2001) argues that despite the high risk, movement participants benefitted from ‘expressing moral outrage and experiencing the pleasure of agency’ (p. 272). As Wood (2001) specifies, moral outrage initially motivates peasants’ participation and in the later stage pride is deepened through acting in the movement and at the same time the on-going acting itself carries great pleasure for participants. Wood calls the pride and pleasure ‘emotional in-process benefits’, and explains that participation itself indicates ‘the assertion of dignity and defiance through the act of rebelling’ and this is ‘a constitutive and expressive reason’ for acting (2001, p.268). In this sense, participants act in order to act. Participation itself is one goal of action. The moral outrage, pride, and pleasure compose a vital force that impels peasants’ insurgency despite the high risk.

Barker (2001) argues that it is the shifts of emotions during action that allow people to make sense of action. In the case study of the 1980 strike movement in Gdansk, Barker (2001) found that actors’ memories facilitated the shifts of their emotional expressions during their action: ‘fear then laughter, doubt and pleasure, solidarity and contempt, solemn silences and fierce shouting, moments of panic and idylls’ (Barker, 2001, p.193). It is through those turning moments from fear to laughter, doubt to pleasure, and panic to bravery that action was mobilised and sustained through the processes of ‘interactive discovery’ (p. 193). As the action proceeds, the ‘passionate collective dialogue crystallized their ideas and cemented new patterns of social organization’ (Barker, 2001, p.193). Through these dynamics, actors together discover the capacities for their on-going collective action.
From the angle of understanding the management of fear in high-risk movements, Goodwin and Pfaff (2001) study in detail four common types of mechanisms that served to mitigate fears among participants and generate commitment in two high-risk movements (the U.S. civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the East German civil rights or civic movement of the late 1980s). These include 1) intimate social networks, in which the close ties between actors provide support and encouragement to each other; 2) mass meetings, which offer actors ‘a sense of security in numbers’ and sometimes ‘a collective feeling of unusual energy, power, and solidarity’ (p. 289), and similarly mass gatherings offer people ‘a collective emotional experience of solidarity, hope, and courage’ (p. 290); 3) identification with the movement, which also relates to the recognition of collective identities that leads to participants’ prospect of less harm or injury when they become a small part of a large and irrepressible movement (p. 293); 4) shaming, which serves to increase the costs of non-participation in movements.

In my view, these mechanisms arguably facilitate emotional in-process benefits (Wood, 2001) and emotional shifts (Barker, 2001) during action. In large scale assemblies, various kinds of rituals are given the opportunities to be presented so that a collective emotion may be experienced. As Goodwin and Pfaff put it, ‘solidarity, hope, and courage’ is ‘larger than the sum of their individual grievances’ (p. 290). As they summarise, ‘The richer a movement’s culture – with more rituals, songs, folktales, heroes, denunciation of enemies, and so on – the greater those pleasures’ (Goodwin and Pfaff, 2001, p.19). This understanding of rituals is in line with what Juris (2008) calls ‘affective solidarity’ which is a process of performative rituals amplifying emotions and then transferring the emotion into a sense of collective solidarity (p. 65). Juris (2008) argues that activists in movements can draw upon the intense feelings of rituals to facilitate ongoing movements.

The four types of mechanisms studied by Goodwin and Pfaff (2001) are useful in understanding the situation in China. Chinese citizens for many years have been practising their judgement of what behaviour or action (both online and offline) may be regarded as being politically sensitive by the authorities. To put it more specifically, the first three types of mechanisms in Chinese cases are arguably effective in affecting Chinese citizens’ anticipation of the sensitivity of the issue at stake. As I will demonstrate in the case study of the Southern Weekly Incident in Chapters 5, 6, 7, the intimate social networks, mass gatherings and the collective identification in the Southern Weekly Incident all helped enhance citizens’ feeling of their voice being so loud that it was less possible for the authorities to take brutal action (such as arresting people) since doing so would evoke public resistance. The feeling of being only a small part of a large scale group convinced many moderate participants that the arresting targets (if there had to be any) would not be them but those appearing to be standing out, and so their individual action becomes less sensitive. These mechanisms certainly work through affecting people’s prediction of the loss, or more precisely in Chinese cases, the political punishment of action.
In this sense, it seems also reasonable to add another element of timing that may effectively influence people’s prediction of consequences of action. In a politically repressive country, the timing of changing leadership often implies different political climate and authoritarian approaches to suppressing political action. The timing of the Southern Weekly Incident, which coincided with the transition to Xi’s leadership at the end of 2012, to a great extent determines people’s observation and interpretation of political conditions and the possible action outcome. By the time the Southern Weekly Incident emerged, China’s new leader Xi Jinping had been in post for less than two months. Since assuming leadership, Xi had initiated a series of unprecedented campaigns such as anti-corruption and deepening market reforms. For some Chinese citizens, the messages signalled by these campaigns increased the optimism about the transformation of all fields in China. Undeniably, feeling optimistic about the outcome, in particular seeing the potential triumph of the action, greatly promoted people’s action in this case.

The mechanism of shaming also worked powerfully on the mobilisation of journalists who felt ‘morally kidnapped’ (introduced in Chapter 6) and forced to be confrontational. The Internet, as a digital public platform and thus being used to manage personal profiles (Rogers, 2013), to some extent enforces public presentation from particular people. To take another example, a well-known Chinese journalist, who initiated an online whistle-blowing campaign to report the corruption of a senior government officer, confessed in my interview that his whistle-blowing report attracted much attention and expectation to the extent that he was at the same time suffering from huge public pressure and he ‘had no way back’.

Through the mechanisms elaborated above, emotions that encourage action, such as outrage, excitement, pride and pleasure, are amplified, and fears are mitigated. Given the ideological nature of the issue of press freedom at the centre of Southern Weekly Incident that implies the lack of immediate benefits of action, the kind of emotional in-process benefits that Wood (2001) introduces appeared to play a pivotal role in mobilisation. The numerous emotional bursting points when somebody decided to stand up, particularly in the form of people feeling irritated, as explained by action participants themselves in my interviews, also vividly demonstrate Barker’s (2001) notion that the shifts of emotions are how people make sense of action. To take another example, in the Maoming PX Protest which took place in March and April 2014, citizens in Maoming city (a small city in south China) protested against the construction of a petrochemical plant that would manufacture paraxylene (PX). Citizens’ confrontation became more severe after physical hostility by police caused serious injuries to citizens. It is clear that citizens’ action was elevated after being irritated by the brutal form of repression used by the local authorities.

To understand emotions sociologically, I need to once again mention Melucci’s (1996a) theory of latent effects and network establishment in everyday life, as emotions are enduring and sustained through network activities. To take this point further, emotions in movement recruitment should be considered as entrenched in people’s past experience before the issue at stake emerges. There exists not a single account of the emergence of emotions, but a life-long emotion continuum.
for many people. For example, the 1989 student movement for many students involved is a life-
long trauma (D. Zhao, 2001). On 3rd and 4th June Tiananmen Square protest, students saw their
friends beaten and arrested by the police. Violence and blood in the square spoke to the
vulnerability of students and have left the trauma of military crackdown (Yang, 2000; D. Zhao,
2001; Béja, 2011). As I found out in my investigation of the Southern Weekly Incident, some of
the 1989 movement participants have since become activists exercising confrontation in other
collective action including the Southern Weekly Incident, and as they indicated in my interviews,
the emotions generated in 1989 were deeply entrenched and are still powerful, despite their
sensitive identities.

Emotions should be examined within a wider frame of people’s life experience where motivation
of action is established, shaped, and sustained, rather than the emotions directly related to the
particular action. In my case study, I endeavour to practise this exploration by asking journalists
and citizens to narrate their life experience (these accounts are partially presented in Chapter 5
and 6). Briefly, Chinese journalists and citizens’ outrage over media censorship, and activists’
ingestion over political repression by the Party had accumulated for a long-time to the point they
were irritated by the censoring of the 2013 Southern Weekly New Year Edition and mobilised for
collective action. The activist community’s sustainability over time and their continual commitment
in regular gatherings and in many cases of defiance and confrontation were also taken into
account when examining their emotions.

In summary, the focus on the forming system of action, in particular emotions, requires us to
examine collective action in relation to people’s experience before and during particular incidents.
Emotions interact with social and cultural issues as well as individuals’ thoughts, feelings,
cognitions, memories, and the perception of the self. Emotions and all these elements together
generate physical action. Physical action is facilitated, and at the same time continues to generate
emotions. The emotions in collective action include not only the instant emotions that initiate and
sustain action, but also the ones that accumulate long-term in people’s past.

Concerned with mechanisms, I certainly need to address the facilitation of collectivity in collective
action, besides understanding how emotions work individually. Specifically, I need to articulate
the mechanism involving interaction between participants. The interaction is implemented neither
merely physically nor simply emotionally, but in symbiotic form of physicality and emotionality co-
developing during action. The entrance of new technologies into this analytical account also urges
the understanding of participants’ interaction. The facilitation of the Internet in collective action
brings about a new form of mobilisation mechanisms of collectivity in the digital age. The cultural
codes and the sense of collective belonging are now communicated and established through
digital networks (Benkler, 2006). In this context, I study the concept of embodiment in movements
to address the collective mechanism in collective action, highlighting the logic of connective action
in the digital age.
3.2. The logic of connective action: understanding embodiment in the digital age

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) coined the term the logic of connective action to depict contemporary large-scale networks of contentious action. They argue that the logic of connective action is ‘based on personalized content sharing across media networks’, and is distinct from the logic of collective action that is ‘associated with high levels of organizational resources and the formation of collective identities’ (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, p.739). They assert that the organising of action has become more personalised, in particular being embodied by elements of this ‘personalized communication’: ‘Political content in the form of easily personalized ideas’ and ‘Various personal communication technologies that enable sharing these themes’ (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, p. 744). The former ensures that the action frames are inclusive of different personal motivations for a particular contestation, while the latter emphasises the pivotal role of communication technologies. Taking digital media as organising agents, people co-produce and co-distribute personally expressive content. The network itself becomes the organisational structure and the action becomes a personal expression. This logic bypasses the organisational dilemma in collective action that requires people to adopt particular social identities and join actions where personal participation costs may outweigh marginal gains.

The logic of connective action as an analytical outlook on contemporary collective action is useful in that it dissolves the boundary between action in online and offline spheres and allows action to be examined as coherent connectedness. To be more specific, through personalised and various expression connected by the network facilitated by digital media, people’s discussion, expression of emotions, opinion demonstration such as sending open letters and online petitions in a particular case form a collective force. The Internet enables people to participate in action through their digital devices regardless of where they are. In this way the Internet also allows interaction between actors to simultaneously take place regardless of particular time and location. In this sense, it is also useful to understand the logic of connective action as a framework that enables interactive mechanisms to be implemented in the digital age. Yet, I still need to articulate how individuals’ commitment to taking action, from being emotionally mobilised to being physically engaged, can be understood.

Theories of embodiment explore how individuals’ commitment to taking action can be understood by conceptualising the relationship between physicality and subjectivity in collective action. Although the term embodiment, used in different research fields (including psychology, philosophy, computer science, robotics, artificial intelligence, resource economics, physical theatre training, music, and law), takes on different meanings, Kevin McDonald (2006) provides a significant account of embodiment in movements and I would like to explore his views in my employment of this term. McDonald (2006) claims embodiment is the action grammar of contemporary movements. Specifically, he argues that people participating in collective action bring their personal experiences and feelings to the collective group, and through acting with other people, they encounter their vulnerable selves and recover interiority. This is a sensory process
in which people reconnect their physicality and subjectivity, and in which people reconstruct their subjectivities and reconnect their subjectivities with other people’s subjectivities. In the centre of the examination of embodiment, as McDonald (2006) claims, is the construction of embodied narratives showing the connection of people’s physical efforts with the construction of their own subjectivity and with other people’s subjectivity.

Embodiment develops with the intensification of emotions. This is engineered by rituals (mass gathering itself is a form of ritual) which I mentioned in discussing emotions. The rationale embedded in collective action can be understood as such: people experience embodiment through the ritual of collectivity, and various rituals in action generate and enhance emotions, which further trigger embodiment. The process of embodiment is key in implementing the facilitation and sustentation of the mobilisation of collective action.

Considering the cumulative nature of emotions, embodiment in collective action should also be understood by reflecting on people’s life experience. Specifically, people’s establishment of intersubjectivity in collective action should not be simply seen as spectators’ sympathy but better understood from their embodied concerns and anxieties. It is in this sense that McDonald (2006) claims that people could see their subjectivity in the battered body of another in movements. In the Chinese context, it is important to understand that the numerous cases of unfairness and injustice existing in Chinese society make Chinese citizens concerned about possibly suffering the fate as other victims, as many case studies have indicated (Yu, 2006; Zhao, 2008).

To borrow the concepts of social healing from the field of medicine, an environment facilitating a sense of belonging is proved to be conductive to healing (Ajdukovic, 2004). As Erni (2015) observes, in the Hong Kong Occupy Movement in 2014, occupied sites became the places where strangers comforted and soothed the soul of each other. Participants listened to other people’s suffering and reassured them. Through this process, participants developed a sense of connecting to others, which helped them to liberate themselves and transcend from repressed identities.

In the framework of the logic of connective action, people’s mutual establishment of intersubjectivity is embedded in digital networks which are beyond the limits of time and space, and therefore embodiment may be implemented more efficiently. However, digital networks also complicate the concept of embodiment. The main problem is that embodiment has been discussed as the reconnection of corporal bodies and internal subjectivities through physical action, but some have argued that online action is disembodied (Miller and Slater, 2000). A starting point to address this argument is to understand bodies in the digital age and particularly to answer the question of what meanings online bodies are loaded with. Quite clearly, I need to articulate embodiment in another field, namely, technological embodiment.

Focusing on ‘the use of new technologies of corporeality’ (p. 215), Balsamo (1995) argues that the body which is heavily embedded in the use of technologies ‘is never merely discursive’ but
‘remains a material entity’ (p. 223). In the context of reconceptualising the body ‘as a boundary figure belonging simultaneously to at least two previously incompatible systems of meaning – ‘the organic/natural’ and ‘the technological/ cultural’ (p. 215), Balsamo (1995) explains that the body needs to be understood as ‘a social, cultural and historical production’ (p. 217), meaning that the body, like a product, materially embodies cultural elements such as ‘ethnic, racial and gender identities’, and like a process, handling ‘knowing and marking’ the world and the self (p. 218). The cultural production of the body, as Balsamo (1995) forcefully points out, ‘are always gendered and marked by race’ (p. 218). Gender and race identities are the underlying frameworks of technological embodiment (Balsamo, 1995).

Similarly arguing that technological embodiment is not disembodied, online gaming researchers offer crucial accounts (Jordan and Taylor, 2004; Jordan, 2013). Online games set in virtual worlds offer probably the most immersive type of manifestation of technological embodiment in that new worlds and avatars are created and constructed (Jordan, 2013). In game-based communication, as Jordan puts it, ‘virtual worlds and bodies are being lived by sitting at a computer and linking to others using avatars seen on a screen that can be controlled at the individual’s discretion’ (p. 83). The virtual body is commanded and directed by the real body to live in that virtual world. Bodies in front of the screen are aware of the directing role they are playing. It is impossible for the body to live merely as a virtual body which is detached from the real body outside the computer screen. The real body is also constructed and circumscribed by the technical and cultural environment where it resides. The coexistence and mutual construction and circumscription of the virtual body and real body are summarised by Jordan (2013) as the phenomenon of ‘a bodily duality’ in the virtual worlds (p. 85).

The strong correlation between Balsamo’s (1995) conceptualisation of body being a boundary figure and Jordan’s (2013) theory of a bodily duality in virtual worlds suggests that the online body is an inseparable part of the natural body and constructs the cultural meaning of the body in the contemporary world. Technological embodiment constitutes part of the contemporary culture and contributes to the cultural construction of the body. In a broader sense to understand the technological body, Coté (2010) argues that technics have always been essential in configuring sensory perception of human bodies rather than prosthetic supplementing the biological body. In this sense, humans have always been bodies in technology (Coté, 2010). Boellstorff’s (2010) claim that ‘humans have always been virtual’ makes a similar point but conceptualises virtuality in understanding humans’ cultural existence (p. 33). Boellestorff (2010) emphasises the symbiosis of culture and virtuality. In his account of symbols opening up imaginary worlds, cultural elements are by nature virtual. He argues that human action enables bodies to engage with the world, and through the process of cultural production, they experience virtuality and move to the new world (Boellestorff describes the central engineering of this process as bringing in ‘techne’, p. 54). This is also a process when selfhood is shaped.
In summary, the body in contemporary digital culture is as much a cultural existence as the body in times prior to the Internet. Different forms of technological mediation facilitate embodiment in various ways. Yet, human action in both online and offline spheres should always be understood as embodied, though in particular forms embedded by contemporary culture where technologies play a part. Online communication enabled by digital networks is as embodied as physical protests in traditional social movements. This does not mean that online embodiment is thus worthless for attention, but quite the opposite in that it implies the significance of examining how online embodiment is implemented in the network environment to facilitate the logic of connective action. Embodiment in the logic of connective action marks a prominent mechanism of contemporary collective action, in the sense that the framework of the logic of connective action allows personalised expressions to be efficiently presented, providing abundant resources for mobilising people’s embodiment.

I have now reviewed the relevant theories of collective action and explained my attempt to examine the forming system of action in Chinese cases of collective action. Specifically, I emphasise that the logic of connective action and the mechanism of embodiment, in which emotions figure prominently, need to be examined in order to understand how people’s experience is mobilised and shared. The public sphere ‘in formation’ in China needs to be studied through collective action in which emotions contribute to the mechanism of forming action. Emotional mobilisation of action should also be understood in practices of embodiment within the framework of the logic of connective action in the digital age. The constituent components – namely, the public sphere ‘in formation’, collective action, emotions, and embodiment together form my general framework that needs to be examined in relation to particular cases in China. The political conditions in China forge the peculiar landscape of online and offline action which requires a pragmatic way of understanding it. I will explore this in the next section.

3.3. Understanding collective action in digital China

In the following three sub-sections, I introduce my framework for understanding online and offline action in China, particularly focusing on online voice activities and the radicalisation of action. Though the particular forms and mechanisms of online and offline action are explored through detailed analysis of the case study in Chapters 5, 6, 7, here I elaborate on the complex ideologies and elusive democracy in China in order to contextualise the understanding of the mobilisation of Chinese people. In the final section, everyday resistance is also discussed as an important dimension of action in digital China.

3.3.1. Action online and offline in China

It is worth noting that the division of online and offline action I make here allows for the creation of a relatively clear setting for research, respectively focusing on people’s online voice activities and the offline radicalisation of action, rather than claiming there is a real boundary between online and offline action, let alone indicating any typological framing of collective action. Based on the understanding that online and offline action are often seen as different stages in particular
cases in contemporary China, I treat online and offline action as two aspects in a singular case to investigate the role played by the Internet within online and offline settings.

While the shift from online to offline facilitated by the Internet has been widely celebrated in the West, a similar shift in China has been effectively repressed by the state authorities. The online-offline shift is not as visible and organised, and in many cases, non-existent. The case study of the 2013 *Southern Weekly* Incident in this research demonstrates that the activists who most actively promoted offline protest in the later stage were not the main force initiating online discussion on the early stage. The case saw online and offline action being seemingly segmented and conducted by different groups of people. As a general observation, the dynamics of the successive online and offline action in many Chinese cases are not completed by the same group of people moving from online to offline. It is therefore more helpful in this research to focus on online and offline aspects respectively, investigate the varied action settings, examine the different roles played by the Internet in various stages, and at the same time, pay attention to the interplay between these two aspects of action, rather than being preoccupied by the examination of the online-offline shift. I will now focus on online voice activities and the radicalisation of action.

While the idea of online action has been explored by some scholars as a format translated from offline protests – such as Jordan and Taylor’s (2004) accounts of virtual demonstration, bombarding a specific computer network, virtual sit-in and so on – these advanced strategies have not been widely discovered in China. The type of online action I focus on in China mainly refers to Internet-based contention, namely, communication and discussion, emotional expression, and other more aggressive online activities such as online petitions around certain issues, which are presented in the form of online voice. It may be understood that online communication and discussion are a facet of everyday life in the digital age. Yet, online communication and discussion in particular cases facilitate a special form of collectiveness, and with the online voice growing louder, a collective force is formed. Here, voice is the format and presentation of action, and it becomes the agent of activism in the social space created by the webs.

A decade ago, Zheng and Wu (2005, p.531) conceptualised ‘voice activities’ as a low risk strategy used by Chinese citizens online to challenge the state. They argue that voice activities appear to not directly undermine or overthrow the state and therefore seem to be accepted by both the state and society in many cases (Zheng and Wu, 2005). Being restricted by the state’s Internet control, voice activities certainly are limited to some issues and scales, and the dissemination of the voice often requires citizens to strategically bypass online censorship. Yu (2006) stresses that whether the voice can develop to a certain scale partly depends on the degree that it challenges the state;

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8 For the idea of online action as a format translated from offline protests which is not the type of online action I will examine in the Chinese context, see:
the more subversive, the less possible. With the contested space being strategically expanded by the state, and with the co-evolution of state control and citizens' strategies for activism (which I have introduced in Chapter 2), there seems to be much room for the voice to develop online.

Online embodiment is powerfully mobilised in online voice activities. On 25 April 2003, the death of a 27-year-old graphic designer Sun Zhigang was reported under the title ‘University graduate detained and cruelly beaten to death for not showing his temporary resident card’ in the newspaper *Southern Metropolitan Daily*. The report was followed by a commentary ‘Who is responsible for the unnatural death of a citizen?’ Sun was on his way to an Internet cafe in the southern city of Guangzhou on 17 March 2003 when he was detained by police for failing to display his temporary resident card, and then was beaten to death three days after his detention (Zhao, 2008). A great number of Chinese citizens were mobilised to share their experience of the vagrancy laws and police violence in online forums. Numerous posts expressed the outrage generated by citizens’ past experiences. As more than a few citizens claimed in their posts, they were concerned that they could be the next Sun Zhigang - a normal citizen wandering around the city. The online discussion about anti-vagrancy laws in China became too fierce to be ignored by the government and finally led to the abolition of these laws (Yu, 2006).

Admittedly, the immediate effects of online voice in Chinese cases on compelling the response or accountability of the authorities are difficult to achieve. As Yu (2006) points out, ‘[the] breakthrough came only after online public opinion was too strong to be ignored by state authorities’ (p. 316-317). The abolition of the vagrancy laws is an unusually successful outcome of online civil force. Another example is the SARS epidemic in 2003. Though information about the epidemic was initially strictly controlled on traditional media by the state, information about the disease spread on the Internet from Hong Kong and overseas sources and quickly caused pervasive panic, making the total control of online information almost impossible in the later stages. The fast growing demand for information forced the government to loosen its information control online and on traditional media (Kalathil, 2003).

I have argued in Chapter 2 that my research is concerned with long-term social democratisation rather than specific action effects on government policies. It could be pointed out that in a heavily repressive context like China, simply raising the voice is more transgressive than in other more liberal political contexts. To take the example of the incident of a high-speed train crashing in Wenzhou China in July 2011, which killed at least 40 people. During the exposure of the incident, outrage at the government’s slow and ambiguous response flooded Sina Weibo, China’s most popular social media at that time. It was rare for the public to shout down the authorities to such an extent but the outrage on the Internet this time appeared to be overwhelming. Though no street protest around this disaster occurred, the effects of voicing demand for accountability of the authorities cannot be measured merely by the central government’s ruling to sack the railways during the incident.

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9 SARS is the viral respiratory disease of *severe acute respiratory syndrome* which broke out in China at the end of 2002 and caused more than 8,000 cases including near 800 deaths by July 2003, according to WHO.
The radicalisation of action in China is high risk. The complex meanings of this risky action may be better understood by examining the establishment and expansion of a network of activists in China, given that the national and regional networks of activists are playing an increasingly important role in many cases of street action. The activist communities and networks in China are currently under-studied, possibly due to their sensitive political nature which requires a safeguarded invisibility. Though discussing this issue is beyond the scope of my research, I endeavour to establish an understanding of the activists’ network which is relevant to my case study. An analytical account is thus presented in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6.

Nevertheless, discussing the role played by the Internet in facilitating street action is also helpful for understanding the distinct dynamics of street action in China. Gerbaudo’s (2012) study on social media and social movements depicts the role of social media as choreographing street movements. Though Gerbaudo (2012) focuses on the dynamics of action moving from online to offline, the nuanced account he provides is meaningful in understanding street action per se. He argues that social media are tools to facilitate people’s physical coming together in public spaces. Through the process of ‘a choreography of assembly’, social media play the role of ‘directing people towards specific protest events’, ‘providing participants with suggestions and instructions about how to act’, and constructing ‘an emotional narration to sustain their coming together in public space’ (Gerbaudo, 2012, p.12). The account of choreography recognises the existence of leaders and organisational formats in contemporary popular movements, albeit in soft forms, and rejects claims that social movements facilitated by technological innovation are entirely leaderless, horizontal, spontaneous and networked (Penny, 2010; Mason, 2012, cited by Gerbaudo, 2012). For Gerbaudo, social media are important only as means of facilitating gathering rather than substituting the physical public space with a virtual one. Social media refashion the way in which people gather on the street (Gerbaudo, 2012).

Though not as explicit, the mobilisation of offline collective action in China demonstrates interesting features of Gerbaudo’s (2012) ideas. As my later analysis shows, activists involved in the Southern Weekly Incident posted messages about their action plan and in so doing, they sent out the signal that apparently did not organise action per se but entailed organising effects. This is a subtle way of realising the directing and instructing of action, regardless of whether it is consciously pursued or not. The pre-existing community of activists facilitated the narration of emotions which worked in long-term establishment and did not need to be clearly presented in particular event occasions. In this way, choreography was implemented subtly.
In general, the case study of *Southern Weekly* Incident draws on the ideas of understanding online and offline action discussed in this section and sets out to respectively investigate the online and offline stages of the incident. Understanding the mobilisation of both online and offline action in China certainly requires acknowledgement of the effective political repression imposed on citizens. However, it would be theoretically and empirically problematic if I give all credit to the Party’s direct suppression of action and fail to address the question of how Chinese citizens’ mobilisation is socially and culturally repressed. In the next section I examine the complex ideologies and elusive democracy in China, attempting to generate the account of the social and cultural restriction of citizens’ action.

### 3.3.2. The complex ideologies and elusive democracy in China

While comprehensively articulating Chinese people’s ideological beliefs is certainly beyond the scope of my research, I draw on a number of Chinese scholars’ work to establish some relevant ideas that are useful for investigating Chinese people’s motivations of and approaches to democratic action in my research. What is crucial for understanding political beliefs in China is that the ideologies of liberty, democracy, and rule of law remain a central theme for debate in China, rather than being perceived as a consensus prior to debates for more pragmatic terms, which is the situation in Western democratic societies (Pan and Xu, 2015). Pan and Xu’s (2015) large scale analysis of a survey of 171,830 Chinese individuals shows that concern for democracy persists, due to ‘China’s legacies of imperial autocracy, Confucianism, Communism, and a tradition of using ideology to legitimize the rule of the dominant political power’ (p. 2).

Yet, the spectrum of Chinese people’s ideological beliefs is far more complicated than a division between pro-Party and pro-democracy. The benefits offered by the Party for ordinary citizens’ compliance to a great extent determines people’s ideologies. Xiang (2012) therefore articulates various political factions in China and introduces a spectrum that describes the correlation of particular political factions with the Party interests. Primarily, a division is drawn between what Xiang (2012) calls *the Party-system faction* and *the reformist faction*. The Party-system faction are the people who are directly connected with the current Party system from which they are granted benefits. They generally support the current system, and oppose fundamental reform. The core assertion of the current Party-system faction in China is statism, that is, *state power above human rights*, rather than socialism and communism which seem to be advocated by them. The reformist faction are the people who do not have a close interest with the current system and support fundamental reforms. They endorse liberalism, advocate limiting official rights and ensuring personal rights. In contrast to the Party-system, they advocate *human rights above state power*. Within the spectrum composed by these two broad factions fall a great number of factions whose specific orientations differ from each other and vary from extremely radical to extremely conservative.

More specifically in the account of the Party-system faction, the mainstream group claim socialism in propaganda and adopt the stance of maintaining stability of the current social order (Xiang,
There are certainly conservatives within the Party-system faction who emphasise the legitimacy of Mao’s regime and endorse the ideas of enhancing government regulation and supressing liberalists. There is also an increasing number of technocrats who promote and manipulate the development of democracy and rule of law to support party policies. Some progressives within the Party-system faction draw upon Marxism and advocate reform that does not undermine the current institutional interests, whilst other progressives within the Party-system are more influenced by liberalism and constitutionalism and can be seen as the liberals within the Party-system (Xiang, 2012). Owing to particular economic and political emphasises, the reformist faction is divided into the market liberalist group and the political progressive group. The market liberal reformists advocate economic liberalty and the reform of markets, while avoiding discussion of the legitimacy of the current system. The political progressives group focus on the legitimacy of the system and advocate democratic constitutionalism. Among these progressives, there are the modest reformist group who recognise the legitimacy of the current system and maintain vigilance at the potential social risks brought about by the radical reform, while there are also the radicals who deny the legitimacy of the current system and advocate democracy and constitutionalism as the legitimate foundation of regime (Xiang, 2012).

The concepts of liberalism and conservatism in such a complex account are loaded with multiple orientations. Democratic ideas pursued by some Chinese citizens are themselves obscure. As Yuezhi Zhao (2001) already argued in a much earlier work, the concept of democracy in China ‘has been articulated with other values, be it nationalism or people’s livelihood’ (p. 22).

Y. Zhao’s historical account (2001) argues that democracy in China is elusive. The connotation of minzhu (Chinese for democracy) is multifaceted, adopting meanings from ‘populist and Marxist participatory concepts’, ‘Chinese Communist Party’s class-based “people’s democracy”’, and the native concept of minben which ‘excludes participation and denotes nothing more than a passive people and a benign ruler’ (Y. Zhao, 2001, p.22). Sun Yat-sen’s establishment of the Republic of China (1912-1949) arguably failed with an experiment in liberal democracy. Maoist people’s democracy provided genuine freedom from foreign aggression, but its class-based claim has been utilised by the PRC to support party policies through manipulating people’s concern. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) became a national trauma and left Chinese elites with a deep ‘aversion to popular participation’ (Y. Zhao, 2001, p.26). The post-Mao search for democracy through the 1978-1979 Democracy Wall movement and the 1989 student movement, in which the mixture of socialist democratic ideas and liberal ideas was presented, also suffered from fierce suppression, which has profoundly affected some liberal democrats who now ‘endorse political apathy and reject popular political participation’ (p. 35). The initiation of economic reforms that soon followed in the 1980s and the deepening of market reforms in the 1990s successfully gained some intellectuals’ embraces of political conservatism. As Y. Zhao (2001) argues, a liberal notion of democracy is only held ‘among some idealistic and probably more farsighted elite reformers as a way to secure Chinese capitalism against threats from within (official corruption) and from below (worker and peasant revolts)’ (p. 23).
Market reform of more than three decades has generated and been accompanied by social and cultural complication. It has significantly improved many Chinese people’s life quality and consolidated their beliefs in the Party’s orientation (Zheng, 2009). Globalisation of the market has introduced Western ideologies to Chinese people (Zheng, 2009). Yet, facing global competition, new forms of nationalism and statism are also promoted. Some conservatives within the party system have been endorsing a nostalgia for Mao’s era (Xiang, 2012; Pan and Xu, 2015). Xiang (2012) claims there has grown a group of Maoist leftists who endorse the combination of radical nationalism, statism, and some elements of Maoism. In the meantime, people who were left behind by the market reform feel disillusioned with the current Party who have claimed to be the vanguard of working class and serve people. These people re-embraced socialism, re-adopted class discourse, and rejected capitalism (Y. Zhao, 2001).

Understanding Chinese people’s political ideologies certainly needs to take into account the Party’s comprehensive engineering in almost all sectors of Chinese society, most effectively in education (Zheng, 2009). After decades of education across generations, the faith of the Party and obedience to authorities have been tightly related to nationalism and become part of the national personality (Zheng, 2009). I do not intend to simplify the link between China’s Party-led education and people’s ideologies. Doing so, again, would fall into the pessimism of treating Chinese citizens as passive subjects. However, it is important to point out that Chinese people’s internalisation of the ideologies imposed by the Party prominently contributes to the complexity of ideologies, which should be taken into account in understanding ideologies in China historically and sociologically. Furthermore, the sensitivity of political expression and hence the lack of public ideological discourse have obscured many people’s political orientation. Chinese people are constantly interacting with the Party system and a guise has been created by themselves for self-protection. Therefore, political ideologies in China are normally unspoken and not identifiable by people’s occupation, education, and social status.

This account of the complex ideologies and elusive democracy provided here was confirmed in my case study of the Southern Weekly Incident. Though admittedly it cannot fully explain the complexity of people’s action, hopefully it can help further the understanding of what are fundamentally influencing Chinese people’s approaches in the incident.

There remains another dimension that I would like to discuss in examining Chinese people’s collective action, namely, action as everyday resistance. In the next section I articulate Scott’s (1985) concept of everyday resistance to understand this important aspect of Chinese society.

3.3.3. Action as everyday resistance

The term everyday resistance is elaborated by Scott (1985) in his ethnographic study of the peasantry in rural Malaysia in the 1970s. In his account, peasants pursued ‘prosaic but constant struggle’ with ‘those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them’ (Scott, 1985, p.XVI). It is an everyday form of resistance involving peasants’ daily practice of ‘foot
dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on’ (p. XVI). Yet, peasants’ needs for ‘physical safety, food, land, or income’ require them to ‘simply follow the line of least resistance’ in order to stay in relative safety (p. 35). As Scott (1985) elaborates, the goal of peasants’ resistance is ‘not directly to overthrow or transform a system of domination’ but ‘survival and persistence’ (p. 301). In this resistance, as Scott further explains, formal organisations are not required but ‘a form of coordination is achieved that alerts us that what is happening is not just individual action’ (p. 301).

Scott’s (1985) articulation of peasants’ everyday resistance is inspiring, as I can clearly identify analogous features in Chinese people’s online contention. To understand Chinese citizens’ online complaints about authorities, which avoid radical confrontation, and to consider their concern of protecting their vested interests and ensuring a secure life in practicing online contention, I cannot deny that the model of everyday resistance offers pertinent points for analysis. The Chinese practice of posting complaints on social media, commenting on social unfairness and injustice online, standing by in social gatherings and so forth demonstrates the mechanisms of political struggles which Scott (1985) depicts.

Drawing on this understanding, I shall take forward the philosophy of everyday resistance to understand many Chinese people’s self-restriction in contention. While radical action is limited, maintaining and surviving contestation of political topics is a theme of contemporary political life in China. The task is to find the ‘durable weapons’ (Scott, 1985, p.303) in everyday practice which, for each individual, guarantees minimal disadvantages.

I would also like to suggest examining the framework of everyday resistance as part of the mechanism of radical cases in China, given that in many cases of collective action in China, the majority of people prefer mild resistance online. Without confrontational intentions, many citizens’ online contention, not much more than their daily complaints, often powerfully promotes collective force that needs to be taken into account. At the time of an event, numerous Chinese citizens use the relevant issue to mock the authorities, complain about dissatisfaction in their own experience, and sometimes stand-by in other people’s street protest. The resisting force created collectively by these forms of action is undeniable.

In the case study of the 2013 Southern Weekly Incident in this research, I observe this mild resistance from the bystanders, onlookers of the street protest, and the journalists who participated in the action on a minimal level. To take the example of journalists’ online posting, it should be understood that the journalists involved in the Southern Weekly Incident had been practising everyday resistance to censorship in their daily news publication. On a certain level, their emotional online posting in the Southern Weekly Incident transplanted their similarly strategic and mild everyday resistance to the digital platform of Weibo. To some extent, many people’s behaviour in the case can be understood as their everyday resistance at a particular moment in time.
In this chapter, I reviewed the literature of collective action, focusing on the ideas of examining the forming system of action in which emotions figure prominently. I examined embodiment in collective action in context, foregrounding the logic of connective action in digital age. I examined ways of studying online and offline collective action in China, where people's complex ideologies and democratic ideas, and their everyday resistance, underpin various approaches to their action in collective action.

This chapter and the previous chapter outlined the literature I draw on to analyse my case study in this research, from the perspectives of studying the Internet and the public sphere in China and understanding Chinese collective action in digital age. In summary, the main elements of my theoretical framework lie in three interrelated propositions. First, the public sphere ‘in formation’ is promoted in collective action, which is engineered by the mechanisms of emotions and embodiment. Second, the frame of the public sphere ‘in formation’ and collective action needs to be articulated in relation to the Internet, which requires a focus on the interrelation between online and offline. Third, the public sphere which is ‘in formation’ is key to understanding contention in China, but it needs to be examined in the wider Chinese context, particularly the interrelation between the authoritarian state and citizens’ action. Now I will move on to introduce the issues at stake in my research and my methodologies.
Chapter 4 Issues and methodology

4.1. Research issues

This research examines the effects of the Internet on collective democratic action in China. After articulating Internet studies, the public sphere, collective action, embodiment and other mechanisms of social mobilisation in digital China, I propose to study issues generated from these perspectives in order to approach my research topic. These issues and the relationships between them are mapped on the next page (Figure 1). In general, my approach focuses on the reoccurrence of democratic events in China and endeavours to make sense of this process in a fourfold framework. It is a framework that encapsulates first, an event-triggered process of social mobilisation; second, within mobilisation the mechanisms of state repression, ideologies, emotions, and embodiment that are embedded in the logic of connective action; third, the interplay between powers of politics, market, technology, and civil society in contemporary China; and fourth, the indefinite social transformation that is composed by multiple events and that foregrounds the formation of a public sphere in China.
A case of the interplay between powers of politics, market, technology and civil society

Figure 1 Framework Diagram

Indefinite social transformation: The formation of the public sphere
The framework presumes the occurrence/reoccurrence of multiple cases of collective action, the basic engineering units of the public sphere ‘in formation’. These cases are triggered by particular events, which are followed subsequently by information dissemination, citizens’ online contention, and potential offline action. The interplay between powers of politics, market, technology, and civil society operates at every stage of action unfolding, through affecting the competition between mobilisation mechanisms of emotions, embodiment, the logic of connective action, and state repression and ideologies. The occurrence/reoccurrence of cases is facilitated by latent networks linking together. The state’s domination of communications (Dean, 2010) through technology, concerned with the political economy of the Internet, was also taken into consideration to add a critical perspective of technological empowerment in politics at large.

In Figure 1, indefinite social transformation is shown as a horizontal line across the whole research map, underpinning the discussion of all the issues encapsulated in this framework. This line is composed of multiple cases (‘specific events’) encapsulating the interplay between the powers of politics, market, technology, and civil society. These cases are inter-related by latent networks. Within each case, we see the vertical depiction of the dynamics as follows:

A specific event first triggers information dissemination (Procedure 1). Secondly, online discussion and more aggressive online activities such as online petitions are promoted in the form of online voice (Procedure 2a). This online contention may further facilitate people’s offline action on the street (Procedure 2b). Thirdly, online information dissemination which involves the topic of confrontation may directly mobilise people to take street action (Procedure 3). The competition between mechanisms of state repression, ideologies, emotions, embodiment, and the logic of connective action repeatedly promotes or constrains each procedure of this vertical unfolding.

To be more specific, in Procedure 1, the competition between mechanisms decides how citizens may disseminate information through practising resistance of information control (such as racing against deletion). In Procedure 2, the competition between mechanisms decides to what level online contention may be pursued (Procedure 2a) and whether online contention can further facilitate offline action (Procedure 2b). In Procedure 3, the competition between mechanisms determines to what degree citizens may be mobilised directly by the issue at stake to take street action.

The exploration of this framework involves three levels of analysis; the individual level is concerned with emotions, embodiment, ideologies, and the Internet facilitation of connective action; the institutional level is concerned with state ruling and Internet regulation; and the structural level is concerned with issues of social mobilisation and the formation of the public sphere. In the descriptive analysis of the case study, I will specifically address the following questions:

- How do Chinese citizens use the Internet to acquire information and pursue political contention online, despite the strict control of information flow by the state?
- How is offline collective action mobilised and organised in China?
- How is the logic of connective action presented in collective action in China?
- How do the mechanisms of state repression, ideologies, emotions and embodiment work in digital China? And how is the interplay between these mechanisms presented in a particular case?
- To what extent does politics in China restrict social mobilisation in collective action?

Ultimately, the question that encapsulates all these other questions and is the overarching purpose of my project remains:

- How can Internet usage promote a democratic society in China?

To investigate these issues, I pursue qualitative, reflexive and situated research. A mixture of methodologies is adopted, as I explain in sections 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4.

### 4.2. Qualitative, reflexive, situated research

I adopt qualitative methodologies pursuing reflexive and situated research. Qualitative research has the capacity to generate in-depth understanding of everyday life, human experiences, social processes, discourses and relationships, and their attached meanings (Mason, 2002b). Mason (2002b) argues that qualitative research produces contextual generalities. Empirically, Becker (1996, p.57) argues that qualitative researchers are in the scene to ‘describe a system of relationships’, and by doing so, researchers are able to explore causal mechanisms behind human behaviour.

To address my research issues, I strive for analyses that are contextual, embodied, relational and descriptive. I seek to produce a full description which can convey the richness, depth, multidimensionality and complexity required to explore my theoretical framework. The anthropological notion of *thick description* in ethnographic studies offers a useful guideline for my research. Clifford Geertz (1973) argues that ethnographic studies is like trying to read ‘a manuscript-foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour’ (p. 314). As Geertz (1973) explains, anthropologists extend acquaintances to approach ‘extremely small matters’ (p. 318). I also pursue microscopic data to establish a nuanced and full description, in order to pin down fluid, dynamic and relational elements that are essential in my topic.

The principal of reflexivity is crucial in qualitative research. Reflexive science values researchers’ involvement in the research setting, as opposed to positive science which requires the insulation of researchers from research subjects (Burawoy, 1998). As Burawoy (1998, p.5) elaborates, in reflexive research we employ ‘multiple dialogues to reach explanations of empirical phenomena’, and thematise ‘our participation in the world we study’, rather than using a pre-fixed uniform
procedure to mechanically obtain data, like that that in positive research. In contrast to the claim of pursuing accuracy in positive science, reflexive research embraces the researcher’s proactivity in constructing research setting for generating meaningful data (Burawoy, 1998).

Particularly in the study of collective action, Melucci (1996a) argues that researchers’ intervention and interaction with actors are necessary, as otherwise research might rely too much on the representation of actors and end up with ‘a new kind of ‘objectivism’” (p. 387). As he explains, identifying the meanings of action merely with the ideas of the actors undermines the validity of research in that the knowledge is ‘the outcome of a very ‘subjective’ source’ (Melucci, 1996a, p.387).

The intervention of the researcher in the research field obviously raises the issue of the researcher inevitably having an effect on research subjects which may alter what is being observed. As Becker (1996) points out, ‘whenever a social scientist is present, the situation is not just what it would have been without the social scientist’ (p. 61). Arguably, interviewers’ race and gender, interviewees’ comprehension of interview questions, and interview schedule and structure may affect what is presented in the interviews (Burawoy, 1998). Research participants may also want to manipulate what can be discovered (Becker, 1996). Melucci (1996a) also points out that the action under observation is ‘action in relation to the observer’ (rather than the ‘natural’ action) (p. 388). Michael Polanyi (1998, p.17), the philosopher of natural science, argues that even in natural sciences researchers are part of the world they study, hence his theory of ‘personal knowledge’ rejects the separation of subject and object. In the same vein, Mason (2002b) calls for ‘critical self-scrutiny by the researcher, or active reflexivity’, which means that ‘researchers should constantly take stock of their actions and their role in the research process, and subject these to the same critical scrutiny as the rest of their “data”’ (p. 7).

The issue of powers in research also needs to be addressed. Powers in research may be presented in the form of researchers (or research participants) dominating research orientation and silencing opinions outside a designed framework (Burawoy, 1998). Feminist critiques of this perspective are valuable. The feminist Donna Haraway (1988) forcefully points out that researchers who use an omniscient observer’s gaze leaping out of the world are playing a ‘god trick’ that views the objects as being passive and stable (p. 581). She argues that this is a form of domination of knowledge. Haraway (1988) argues for a theory of ‘situated knowledges’ that emphasises the need to consider subjects as complex bodies with subjective vision and personal will rather than being simply passive and disembodied (p. 581). Situated research acknowledges that the standpoint of the researcher is singular and views are limited and partial. Situated knowledges are generated by contested, embodied, and partial observations. In short, situated knowledges are embedded and embodied forms of knowledge emphasising the specificity of research subjects in particular situation. Views in situated knowledges are always subjective and partial. Yet, Haraway (1988) argues that only situated knowledges promise objectivity.
The methodology of obtaining situated knowledge is also articulated in art-based research which intends to generate experiential and embodied understanding through the cooperation between researchers and participants in art projects. In art-based research, researchers and research participants create and experience arts together in art projects as a research means for data collection or outcome presentation (McNiff, 1998). Arts-based research highlights sensory experience as crucial in facilitating embodied understandings that are ineffable in discursive communication (Knowles and Cole, 2008; Barone and Eisner, 2012; Jagodzinski and Wallin, 2013). The idea of generating sensory experience in research is important and certainly has been practised beyond art-based projects. It is reasonable to suggest that ethnography and participant observation are similar to art-based research in that they employ researchers’ experience to generate in-depth understanding of culture. This view is highlighted in my research, particularly through emphasising my embodied journalistic experience. I will explain this point in more detail later.

The alteration brought about by the researcher’s intervention in the research field has been discussed together with the broader issue of context effects in research. As Burawoy (1998) explains, context effects in interviews are automatically produced by both the interviewers and interviewees, and the social conditions and relations which form the setting of the interviews. Wider issues of politics, economy, culture, and specific research time and location are of concern. Drawing on this view, we may then enter the requirement of contextualisation of research to consider situated knowledges extensively and sociologically. In reflexive sociology, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) emphasise that social conditions shape research objects thus reflexive sociological research needs to specifically study the structuration of the everyday world where the researcher and the participants are embedded. This idea extends the conceptualisation of reflexivity to include the general consideration of contextualisation in sociological research.

To outline my epistemological standpoint, I pursue reflexive and situated research through qualitative methodologies. My research is interactive and dialogic, in the sense that actors’ verbal and textual expressions are encouraged in interviews. Drawing on the views of reflexive science and situated knowledges, I take into account powers and context effects in research to construct meaningful knowledge. I pursue embodied understanding of my research subjects by carefully carrying out contextualisation in both research design and data analysis.

These ideas still need to be embedded in my research theme of studying collective action. Melucci (1989) practised his ideas of reflexively examining meanings given by actors in the Milano Project (conducted from 1980 to 1984) which studies four movement networks. As I discussed in Chapter 3, Melucci (1989, 1996a, 1996b) emphasises the formation of social networks in mobilising movements and rejects the understanding of movements as the product of external enforcement. Accordingly, he argues that frameworks and approaches investigating collective action should directly address the essential question of ‘how are ‘we’ formed?’ (Melucci, 1996a, p.388). Now I examine Melucci’s (1989) construction of a reflexive model in his investigation.
The Milano Project involved researchers conducting surveys, in-depth interviews, laboratory experiments, and comparative content analysis of documents and videotapes to obtain and reconstruct meanings of people’s action. Specifically, researchers identified central groups in each movement network and these groups were studied in an experimental environment. In the experimental stage, researchers purposely exposed the groups to certain stimuli (which presented external discourses about their identities), so as to inspire their discussion about identities. Researchers recorded discussion and played back selected videos to stimulate further discussion. Melucci (1989) emphasises that the feedback given by researchers in the experimental stage was non-causal and non-interpretative, relying upon phenomenological hypothesis rather than researchers’ interpretative hypothesis. Data obtained through various methods in the project were analysed comparatively to make sense of the forming of networks and collective action (Melucci, 1989).

Melucci’s research model is inspiring in that actors were invited to deeply and critically reflect on the meanings they gave to their action. The accounts of meanings were attributed to actors’ expression. It also acknowledged and endeavoured to minimise researchers’ interference in interviewees, through restricting interpretative questions from researchers and using social discourses and actors’ own discourses to stimulate discussion. At the same time, the multiple use of different methods to obtain data enables comprehensive and critical knowledge to be constructed. Melucci operated his research on the Milano Project within a framework that assumed interference which he then controlled and minimised. His particular approach to managing interference and understanding meanings of action and networks is not to be duplicated, but I take forward these ideas and considerations in carrying out in-depth interviews in my research. I similarly apply other methods of online observation and qualitative content analysis, collecting and analysing contextual data to construct a reflexive understanding. However, setting up the artificial laboratory stage in my research is practically unrealistic. Melucci’s cases are enduring movements (the youth, women’s, ecological and neo-religious movements) which took place in Western democracies where protests are legal, whilst Chinese cases in my research are breaking events sparked by severe conflicts and take place in a sensitive environment of state repression. Participants in my targeted cases in China normally take provisional action and take careful measures for self-protection. Assembling actors to conduct a social experiment would itself be risky.

Nevertheless, multiple methods of online observation and qualitative content analysis, in-depth interviews, and collecting and analysing contextual data are applied in my case study. I will discuss case studies and these other methods in the following sections.

### 4.3. Case studies and multiple methods

With the contextual and methodological considerations which I have discussed, I adopt case studies as my key methodology. The 2013 *Southern Weekly* Incident is investigated to study the effects of the Internet on collective democratic action in China.
4.3.1. Case studies and the 2013 Southern Weekly Incident

Case studies have been embraced by scholars for their capacity to provide descriptive and explanatory data. As Yin (2009) defines it, case study method is ‘an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident’ (p. 18). Yin (2009) emphasises that case studies allow the exploration of why and how questions through a holistic and meaningful analysis of real-life events mirroring real-time contextual conditions. By analysing individuals, groups, and events within context, case studies have the potential to establish causal relationships between subjects.

The focus on technological effects on social mobilisation in my research requires contextualised case studies. Situated understanding of Chinese people also can only be constructed through examining the issues of particular events. As I have explained, multiple methods including online observation and qualitative content analysis, in-depth interviewing, and collecting and analysing contextual data are required in this project to ensure the reflexivity of research findings. For me, using multiple techniques is compatible in case studies, in the sense that various data sources can be cross-examined in the contextual study of an event. The goal of case studies in my research is to expand understandings of Chinese society rather than generalise patterns of Chinese cases, though it is hoped that meanings indicating contemporary Chinese culture at large can be understood through this research.

The 2013 Southern Weekly Incident is adopted for its historical significance in Chinese collective democratic action. Specifically, as I explained in Chapter 3, it focused on ideological issues in China and unfolded both online and offline. It represents some common forms of popular social contestation in contemporary China. Yet, for the extent to which it challenges the limit of the Party’s suppression of ideological contestations, it entails suggestive meaning for future events.

The Southern Weekly Incident saw battles unfold on three fronts - on the Internet, within the media circle, and on the street. Empirically, it profoundly demonstrates my proposed framework which links the Internet and various powers in social mobilisation.

The online front (mainly on Weibo) was a field for information dissemination, online discussion, and online declaration and petitions made by journalists and citizens, as well as for information control by authorities. Statements, declarations, and open letters were posted and reposted by journalists and citizens to form a post relay, confronting the relentless post deletion conducted by Sina under censoring instructions from the authorities. The media circle front extended from Southern Media to all media in China. It was a field where the Party imposed censorship instructions to prohibit the reporting of the Southern Weekly Incident and to enforce a Party guideline of public opinions about the incident. It was also the place where intensive negotiations between Party officials and journalists took place for the purpose of settling the incident. The street front was a field where offline action was mainly practised by supportive citizens and
activists. My investigation of these three fronts highlights Chinese people’s emotions, embodiment, ideologies, life experience, adoption of technologies, and the interplay between powers of the state and civil society.

My journalistic experience at Southern Media prior to undertaking my PhD research, specialising in producing feature profile reports and investigative reports, gave me a valuable insight to media operation in China, as well as empirical skills of observation and conducting in-depth interviews. Owning to my journalists network, I was fortunate to be granted with abundant opportunities for research recruitment and online observation of action mobilisation. I would also like to point out that my journalistic experience likely enhances my embodied and situated understanding of the journalists in this incident. Based on the theory of art-based research which I discussed previously, understanding is better generated through experience. My journalistic experience in China contributed to my sensory experience of this case study – the experience of frustration, helplessness, insensitiveness, and even indifference toward censorship is still deeply rooted in my memory and helps me to understand the meanings journalists attributed to their action (or non-action) in this case.

To briefly summarise my empirical investigation of the 2013 Southern Weekly Incident, I first examined the ways in which the Internet benefitted journalists and citizens’ information acquisition and communication, and the ways in which they adopted the Internet to facilitate online contention (e.g. online declaration and petition). I continued to examine the radicalisation of action on the street, in which I investigated a few groups’ mobilisation of offline protest, explored the dynamics and obstacles of some people’s shifts from online discussion to offline protest, and discussed the interplay between offline action and online voice. I then analysed journalists and citizens’ embodiment experience and various emotions as mechanisms mobilising their action. I also studied connective action based on diverse appeals and personalised expressions as a framework of action in the Southern Weekly Incident. I highlighted a seemingly segmented form of online and offline action directed by different groups of people in this incident. Finally, my investigation of the negotiation taking place within media organisations, people’s self-restriction and self-protection, and their vague political stance during the incident further developed the discussion about the conflicts and pervasive interplay between powers in Chinese society. I conclude by reviewing the testimony episode of the Southern Weekly Incident to address the complexity of the interplay between political and media power in China.

The methods of online observation and qualitative content analysis, in-depth interviewing, and collecting and analysing contextual data were adopted in the implementation of this case study. Specifically, I observed the incident online and collected relevant posts on Weibo during the unfolding of the incident in January 2013 and the following testimony incident episode in December 2013 in which three activists participating in the Southern Weekly protest were detained. I conducted in-depth interviews in December 2013, January 2014, June 2014, and July 2014 with 45 journalists and citizens involved in this case. I also collected contextual data from
domestic and overseas reports and research journals to analyse the political, economic, and social context in China. I will explain the ways these methods were used in the following sections.

4.3.2. Online observation and qualitative content analysis

In online observation, computer-mediated presentation is first-hand data that can be used to study people. It is assumed that people represent themselves through managing their online profiles and status (Rogers, 2013). Drawing on Rogers’s (2013) idea of studying how digital communications are natively shaped online for understanding powers in societies, I see a crucial principle for my online observation moving beyond the study of online phenomenon and enquiring into more general social and cultural issues in Chinese society. In the Southern Weekly Incident, the rich information contained in online posting is essential for investigating how participants felt and how online contention was carried out.

It is clear that collecting digital data requires great reflexivity, as political manipulation is also built into digitalised platforms and links (See Schneider’s (2015) case studies). Schneider (2015) argues that digital networks may be are highly ‘national’ and questions to what extent research can overcome ‘the methodological nationalism’ (p. 85) when researchers follow digital media to conduct analysis. These issues need to be taken into account to critically consider the political economy of the Internet.

I conducted online observation on Weibo and archived relevant Weibo data during the period from 2 January to 9 January, 2013, when the Southern Weekly incident took place. This Weibo data includes (1) statements, declarations, and open letters posted by Southern Weekly staff for factual clarification about the modification incident, and by other Southern Media staff to ask for public support for making petitions; (2) messages, comments, and images (long text generated pictures, cartoons or other art-form presentations) posted or reposted by individuals’ and other media companies’ Weibo accounts to react to and discuss about the incident; (3) photographs broadcasting the street action uploaded by Weibo users. Similar types but much smaller amount of data were also collected when a testimony was issued by Southern Media in December 2013 in order to assist the authorities in charging three involved activists for initiating the protest in the incident.

Specifically, I observed my Weibo newsfeed where messages posted by the people I followed were instantly fed in. I used screen shots every hour to archive the messages on my home page. I identified certain people as my study targets (who were relatively active or for other reasons their expression demonstrated values for exploring the meanings entailed), and accessed their Weibo pages (on the public domain) to specifically observe the majority of their posts published during the incident (I also used screen shots to regularly archive particular people’s posts).

I should consider, at this point, the effectiveness of using my Weibo newsfeed as a source to gather useful data. As I have mentioned, I benefited from having a personal network of contacts which I established when working as a journalist in Southern Media Group. The accounts I
followed on Weibo were mostly profiles of journalists and media organisations (283 accounts out of the 300 accounts I followed were registered by media workers and media organisations). Many of the journalists were current or previous employees of Southern Media, who were at the centre of this incident. During the week when the Southern Weekly Incident took place, my Weibo newsfeed provided a dynamic and updated demonstration of active communication about the incident. Furthermore, journalists regularly reposted messages posted by citizens in their personal networks thus feeding my observation with content produced by ordinary citizens. This content frequently led me to access particular citizens’ accounts to read their other posts. When reading the newsfeed between 2 January and 9 January, I made notes of the real-time intensity of event progress and the emotions conveyed by particular people. I also tried to identify potential interviewees for conducting in-depth interviews.

The collected data provides both the factual information that indicates the timeline and progress of the incident, and the expressive information that can be used to analyse the ways Chinese Internet users publicly expressed themselves, and communicated and interacted with other people in this incident despite the strict regulation and censorship from the government. Online data also helped me prepare interview questions for the next stage of fieldwork. Online data, together with the data obtained from interviews, are used for exploring the feelings, emotions and embodiment behind online contention and offline action.

Clearly, content analysis of online data in my case study is qualitative and subjectively selective, as oppose to computational methods of archiving, labelling, and categorising huge amount of data to study people’s online behaviour (Leetaru, 2012). Content analysis, which has traditionally been regarded by many scholars as a way to systematically analyse texts through labelling units of texts of mass media (McMillan, 2000), has also been adopted to assist qualitative interpretation (Mayring, 2000). I categorised the Weibo posts I collected based on the following groups: ‘progress update’, ‘documents of statements, declarations, and open letters’, ‘demonstrations of post deletion and the citizens’ race against deletion’, ‘examples of citizens’ strategies to bypass online censoring’, ‘emotions, personal stories’, ‘various appeals in petitions’, ‘information from overseas media reports’, ‘information about the street protest’, and ‘information about the testimony’. Overlaps were possible and in these cases posts were given more than one categorisation. I also built separate folders to archive posts of people whom I identified as potential interviewees. Further analysis of particular accounts’ posts were carried out to prepare for in-depth interviews.

The methodology of online research has been developing but remains challenging for researchers, due to issues of anonymity and mutability in digital data (Coleman, 2010). Interpreting computer-mediated presentation requires researchers’ understanding of people’s own beliefs about how computer-mediated communication works in order to catch the meanings people attach to their online action (Hine, 2000; Slater, 2002; Coleman, 2010). Coleman (2010) argues that in using a particular medium people have ‘media ideologies’ which are the ‘beliefs about how a medium
communicates and structures communication' (p. 3). Dealing with this issue, ethnographic researchers have been developing holistic strategies for doing online ethnography. For example, interviews may be carried out when online interactions of people who are being observed are taking place, in order to ask how Internet users interpret their online practice (Hine, 2000). Hine (2000) argues that the mixed ways of observing online and communicating with research participants can create ‘a kind of triangulation through which observations can be cross-checked’ (p. 21).

Cross-checking information through varying methods is practiced throughout my research. The knowledge obtained through online observation does by no means make sense on its own but is analysed together with data obtained through in-depth interviews and contextual documentations. The employment of in-depth interviews and collecting and analysing of contextual data will be explained in the next two sections.

4.3.3. In-depth interviews

In line with Melucci’s (1989) emphasis on actors’ capacity for expressing meanings of action, I conducted in-depth interviews to generate actors’ narratives of their experience. The method of in-depth interviews is used to obtain people’s accounts by asking, listening to, and interpreting what they say and how they say it (Mason, 2002a). The data to be generated through interviewing in this case study is as listed:

1. Participants’ introduction of their experience in the incident, including how they acquired information on the Southern Weekly incident, and how they acted online and/or offline during the incident;
2. Their explanation of the particular ways in which they used Weibo or other Internet-based technologies during online and/or offline stages of the incident (often probing into their perception of the Internet as a medium for communication - how they perceive communication and contention online);
3. Their encounters with post deletion (how many of their posts were deleted) and whether they consciously or unconsciously used any strategies to bypass online censorship during the incident;
4. Their recalling of their emotions and embodiment experienced during the incident (including online and/or offline stages);
5. Their goals, appeals, and personal intentions when pursuing online and/or offline action during the incident;
6. Their past experience in both career and personal life such as struggles or suffering with unfairness and injustice, which may have had an impact on their action during the Southern Weekly Incident;
7. Their points of view in relation to broader issues such as democracy, press freedom, and censorship in China;
8. Their general concerns with the risks of pursuing online and/or offline action in the
Southern Weekly Incident;
9. Their interpretation of the result/outcome of the Southern Weekly Incident;
10. Their interpretation of the effects of the Southern Weekly Incident on themselves and on China;
11. Their comments on the impacts of the Internet on democratisation in China.

I conducted 45 in-depth interviews with people involved in the Southern Weekly Incident. Each interview lasted for about 90 minutes. The first 35 interviews with 30 journalists and 5 non-journalist protesters were conducted in December 2013 and January 2014 in Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing. 10 more interviews with 3 journalists and 7 non-journalist activists who participated in the protest were conducted in June and July 2014 in Guangzhou. The emphases of the interviews in these three cities were distinctive. Being the headquarters of Southern Weekly and Southern Media, the atmosphere around the Guangzhou offices was particularly tense during the incident. Southern Media was the venue for offline protest and Guangzhou was where most protest participants (citizens and activists) were based. Interviews in Guangzhou pursued people’s accounts of both online and offline action. Yet journalists in Shanghai and Beijing also provided valuable accounts explaining their online action. Some Southern Weekly journalists in the Shanghai and Beijing offices seemed to discuss the incident more actively on Weibo, compared to their Guangzhou counterparts, arguably because they felt more uncertain about the incident. In addition, their detachment from the negotiation with the authorities in Guangzhou (which I will discuss in Chapter 7) in some way reduced their concerns about online discussion, whilst journalists who joined the intensive negotiations in Guangzhou seemed to self-restrict online discussions in order not to disrupt negotiations.

The first 35 interviews were carried out almost one year after the incident. This interval of time allowed the interview participants to reflect on their understanding of their action and the attached meanings. The change in political climate and cultural conditions during the year may affect their interpretation of their engagement in the action. This element was also taken into account in my analysis of interview data. For example, when some Southern Weekly journalists in my interviews revealed that they did not feel strong emotions during the incident, their posts which I archived during the incident indicated otherwise. The lapse in time is taken into consideration for understanding this contrast, together with other factors such as a discrepancy between online behaviour and interview expression, and their deliberate downplaying of sentimental reflection. Another example is that when citizens and activists who participated in the protest expressed their action with great enthusiasm and excitement, the time gap indicated that their memories of engagement were deep and still invoked emotions when they were interviewed. This type of consideration shows the reflexive principle which I claim to pursue in my research, in particular

Activists in this research refers to Chinese people who are active in political discussion (both online and offline), campaigns, protests, assemblies. The most definitive characteristic of the activists I discuss in this research is that they are self-labelled as activists, revolutionists, or reformists, which is clearly contrasting with other Chinese citizens who avoid these identities and the discussion of relevant issues. More introduction of activists in China is given in Chapter 5.
acknowledgement that interview conditions themselves (time, location, etc.) may cause effects that need to be taken into account.

I also specifically scheduled my interviews in Guangzhou to be around the first week of January 2014 when there potentially may have been events emerging in relation to the one year anniversary of the Southern Weekly protest. The authorities apparently carried out strict control to prevent the emergence of such events by increasing the police presence outside the office buildings of Southern Media. Though there was no unrest outside the company, the interviews I conducted with a few citizens who protested in Southern Weekly Incident benefitted from the special timing of the anniversary which, according to some interviewees’ explanation, brought their memory of the incident back.

In December 2013 Weibo discussion was sparked by an image of a document of testimony issued by Southern Media in November 2013 to assist the prosecution of activists who participated in the Southern Weekly protest in January 2013. Owing to this event occurring during my fieldwork in Guangzhou, I was able to include this issue in my interview with some journalists and activists.

The remaining 10 interviews were conducted in June and July 2014. They were planned after analysing the data I obtained from the first 35 interviews. The analysis of the first 35 interviews left my intention of establishing the connection between online contention and offline action in this incident unresolved. The five citizens who joined or stood by the protest generally emphasised their marginal role in the protest, which left an incomplete picture of the offline protest. The apparent detachment of online and offline action in this incident was becoming clearer during my interviews. I then reconsidered the approach of trying to establish the online and offline action in the traditional sense of mobilisation, and rethought the mobilisation of offline action from inside the groups rather than from external influence (e.g. the journalists’ confrontation). Evidently, the main force of offline protest consisted of a small number of activists and larger number of bystanders. A few very active citizens played a significant role in promoting the protest and they later became members of the activists’ community. This action model departed from the online-offline linear type of mobilisation. I then proceeded to interview activists and a few other active citizens in order to investigate their actions.

In interviews, I invited the participants to actively recall their experiences. Mason (2002a) argues that interviewing may be adopted as ‘the art of knowledge excavation’ or ‘a site of knowledge construction’ (p. 227). The former treats interviewees as direct informants and asks them to explain ideologies, attitudes, and beliefs, while the latter sees the desired knowledge as presentable only through people’s actual practice, hence the construction of conditions in the interview sites to facilitate people’s practice and the asking and listening during the operation of practice. Not intending to recreate the same action processes (which would not be possible due to the real-time nature of mass social action), I did however endeavour to construct similar type of experiential knowledge in my interviews. Specifically, in most of my interviews, I used the screenshots of the Weibo posts which I took during the incident to assist this construction. Before
I asked a particular interviewee to recall his/her experience in the incident, the screenshots of his/her Weibo posts were shown to the interviewee as a way of reminding them what they posted during the incident. The effects created by presenting these screenshots were remarkable. Many interviewees became willing to recall their experience (perhaps because their memories were awakened or possibly because they felt less awkward to start talking about themselves as the screenshots already revealed their position). Some interviewees expressed that seeing the messages they posted during the incident reminded them the strong emotion during the incident. Some interviewees showed excitement when seeing their past posts and explained that many of these posts had been censored and deleted so they could not see them by themselves anymore. The screenshots were also used occasionally to probe into particular questions (for example, asking about their emotions when they posted a particular message or the meanings they intended to convey in a particular post). In this way, interviewing also served to compensate and cross-check my previous online observation.

Based on my intention of collecting the eleven types of data which I outlined previously, interviews in my case study were semi-structured. They were designed to allow space for interviewees’ free association through their telling of stories and experiences, while at the same time allowing me to provide stimuli in a specific sequence to guide the interview. Rubin and Rubin (2011) argue that a meaningful interview proposal can be prepared only after the work is under way and is thus not possible to prepare in advanced but should remain flexible and iterative. The design of the interviews changes with the progression of the interviews as the researcher is listening, interpreting, and learning from the process of interviewing (Rubin and Rubin, 2011). Many Chinese people are to a great extent self-restricted and self-protected in discussing political issues. When structuring and phrasing questions during interviews, I certainly needed to maintain my sensitivity which may have helped bring me closer to the meanings I sought.

Being sensitive was certainly required in the challenging but crucial task of discussing sensory elements in my interviews. Expressing emotions in my interviews was for many people highly personal and awkward. For the activists in my interviews, they tended to present themselves as determined and brave actors rather than soft-hearted. Mason (2002a) argues that researchers should pay attention to not only ‘what people say’, but also ‘how they say it, and what they do not say’, and ‘how emotionally engaged they are with a particular issue’ to discern and infer their emotions (p. 239). Researchers’ observation of these elements can guide the setting of subsequent questions. This also required that the interviews were semi-structured in my research.

In specific question design, broad questions were asked to encourage expressions of various emotions and opinions. When a general answer was given by an interviewee, specific questions were asked to probe into evidence supporting the answer and their explanation for it. For example, questions such as ‘how would you describe your motivation and emotion when you posted message online during the incident?’ were asked to encourage general self-reflection, which were then followed by questions such as ‘was it the first time you had this feeling?’; ‘why do you think
you had such strong feeling?’, and ‘didn’t you have concerns when posting?’. Specific questions such as ‘how did you feel when you first heard of the newspaper being modified?’ and ‘is there a moment during the incident when you felt the strongest emotion?’ were often used to encourage more nuanced reviews of experience.

Depending on different groups of interviewees, different sets of questions focusing on various aspects were asked. For example, while journalists were invited to talk more about their experience with censorship during their professional careers, other citizens were invited to talk more about their personal struggles with the authorities, and activists were asked to share their experiences of pursuing long-term and regular confrontations. All this information served to provide an account of their life experience which was useful when attempting to explain their emotions and embodiment during action.

Being cautious about the political context in China, I was careful with my phrasing of particular sensitive questions. Let me take two examples. ‘Why didn’t you join in the protest outside the press?’ was an important question to ask the journalists (none of the journalists participated in the offline protest in the incident) in order to understand their personal concern and their calculation of the costs and benefits of engaging in political street action. Considering this question in the Chinese context where political protests implies high risks, some interviewees might reasonably respond to this question with another question ‘why should I join in the protest?’ In order to generate more useful data, I asked the following questions:

- Was there a moment when you felt an impulse to join the protest outside the press?
- Do you think it is necessary for action to go offline rather than remaining online?
- What risks did you anticipate?

Given that many activists in China are prepared to risk imprisonment, questions addressing their anticipation of risks were prone to cause offence (as it has been shown in my interviews that many activists tended to disdain this topic). Rather than asking the question ‘What sort of motivation and justification for action did you hold that surpassed your concerns of the potential risk you were facing in action?’, a combination of the following questions were more helpful in addressing their motivations and anticipated risks:

- What effects did you want to generate through your action?
- What have you experienced in your life that made you become an activist?
- Do you have a particular way of assessing the risk every time you join a confrontation?

There were also three interviews with journalists conducted via email, and one with an activist via phone, for practical reasons and due to the political risks involved. Though issues involved in face-to-face interviews were similarly covered in these interviews, interviewing through email certainly lost the flexibility that was maintained in my face-to-face interviews through the semi-structured design. I therefore carefully included both general and specific questions in designing
the emailed questions, in order to invite meaningful expression. Based on my analysis of the response to the initial mailing questions, more emails were followed to expand communication.

Through the 45 in-depth interviews, I obtained a huge amount of data which I then coded and analysed, together with the data obtained through online observation and contextual documents. As I have mentioned, actors may downplay sensory factors in their action. The compensation of observing data in analysis was essential, especially in understanding the sensory elements of action. The analysis also needed to be supported by contextual data.

4.3.4. Collecting and analysing contextual data

A number of types of contextual data were required in the case study of the Southern Weekly Incident. First, overseas reports on the Southern Weekly Incident produced by media in Hong Kong, Singapore, UK, Germany, France, and US were collected in this case study to help me grasp the general progress and dynamics of the incident. It should be noted that Chinese domestic media were prohibited from reporting on the incident, with the exception of an editorial produced by a Party organ newspaper on 7 January 2013 which criticised the Southern Weekly Incident as being initiated by foreign forces. This will be explored in more detail in Chapter 5. Second, leaked official censoring instructions which banned domestic media’s coverage of the incident were collected. These instructions were occasionally leaked by domestic media workers to some overseas media (e.g. China Digital Times). Accessing this information and considering it together with accounts given by my interviewees who were media employees provided me with information about official repression of the incident. Third, both Chinese domestic and overseas reports on Chinese events and issues reflecting on the current political, economic, and cultural conditions in China were collected. Fourth, official reports and statistical data on Chinese Internet usage (e.g. CNNIC) were collected. This information was needed to analyse the development of the Internet use in China.

Contextual documentation was already reviewed together with other literature from academic perspectives to construct a research framework which I have presented. Collecting contextual data was an ongoing process throughout different stages of my case study. The contextual data constantly provided me updated information to guide my research design, adjust my focus in observation and interviewing, and assist my analysis of the data. In the writing-up stage of the research report, contextual data continued to help me review and assess my findings. Some of the contextual information is also presented throughout my storytelling of the Southern Weekly Incident to help structure the story.

In most parts of the presentation of the Southern Weekly Incident, I adopt the style of storytelling (particularly presented in Chapters 5 and 7 in this thesis). Barone (1995) argues that storytelling makes a particular type of ‘truth claim’ that promotes desirability of knowledge in a particular world view (p. 171). Presenting a procedural and progressing story as part of my case study report, I pursue what Barone (1995) claims as ‘a crafted text’ which is non-fiction and carefully crafted by
my selection and construction of a knowledge framework (p. 175). For me, using storytelling to present a nuanced and grassroots account of the Southern Weekly Incident is a means of thoroughly addressing the complexity this research explores, and most importantly, demonstrating human spirits in particular circumstances. It is also hoped that the storytelling of the Southern Weekly Incident, which opens up many discursive issues, will encourage further exploration of the long-term social transformation in the making in China. Barone (1995) suggests that the researcher in storytelling is ‘promising never to lie, but also never telling the whole truth’ (p. 175). As argued, this research aims to produce a partial, situated, embodied, and reflexive account. My storytelling in this case study is integrated with appropriate analysis in order to sufficiently and clearly examine the research issues.

4.4. Ethics, anonymity, confidentiality

Before I move on to present the story of the Southern Weekly Incident, I would like to clarify a few ethical considerations in this case study.

One of the ethical issues in this research may be raised to question the method of collecting and analysing online data. The issue is rooted in the blurred boundary between public and private spaces in online settings. Particularly, it remains debatable whether messages on public portals should be treated as ‘public statements and therefore fair game for the researcher’, or as ‘the property of their authors and not to be appropriated for academic purposes without permission’ (Hine, 2000, p.24). Public pages of social media form a public domain. Data on public pages of social media is freely shared by Internet users who have decided what anyone can see. In the sense that observational study in a public setting generally involves no breach of privacy (ESRC, 2016), I defend that observational studies on public online domain are permitted. I collected freely and publicly available data from Weibo in my case study. In my interviews, I also explicitly explained to my research participants about my observation of their online posting.

For the consideration of protecting my interviewees and better presenting the story, particular ethical arrangements regarding the anonymity and confidentiality have been made in writing this report. Most of the contributors of the interview data are kept anonymous in this report. Identifying information that may be used to trace their identities has been altered to protect those concerned. The relevant quotations were translated and edited carefully to conceal any traceable feature. To better introduce individuals’ personal experience, which is abundantly employed in the storytelling of this case study, pseudonyms have been used. In the cases where research participants’ online posts and interview data were both adopted in the writing, the links between their Weibo accounts and the content they contributed in the interview were carefully broken to prevent the interviewees’ identities becoming traceable so as to minimise the risk of generating adverse consequence to participants.

However, even given these precautions, some of the journalists’ personal stories of life experience presented in this research are so unique that their identities cannot be disguised. In
these cases, interviewees had been consulted and consent obtained before I proceeded to tell their stories here.

The same issue became clearer in activists’ case. Most of the activists I interviewed had previously spoken out in overseas media. They had exposed their dissident identities in previous social affairs and therefore concealing their identities from the stories they told became impossible. All activists whom I interviewed gave me permission to use their real names (which they were then known as) in my research report. They were frank and open about their intention of publicly airing their resistance. At the interview stage I offered a clear explanation of the potential difficulties and risks for them. I also requested them to reconsider their decision in the final editing stage of writing this thesis. Except for the human rights lawyer Sui Muqing whom I have not been able to make contact with after my interview with him (I explain Sui’s situation below), all the activists I interviewed confirmed their decision to reveal their real names in my research.

The human rights lawyer Sui Muqing was recruited to participate in my interview in June 2014. Sui unreservedly introduced his experience in the Southern Weekly Incident, his personal career, and his past experience in the 1989 student movement. Sui gave consent to reveal his current name in my research report. Given that his current name differs from his original name (as he pointed out), I was aware that revealing his past experience in my report may build the link between his current identity and the past identity which he had concealed for many years. Unfortunately, my plan to require him to reconsider the identity issue in my paper is no longer possible. Sui has been held by police since July 2015 after being accused of inciting subversion of state power – among more than 300 lawyers and activists who were held overnight, currently in custody under criminal detention or under residential surveillance at a location designated by police, and others reportedly disappeared (CDT, 2015b). However, the story of Sui has been widely circulated online after he was detained, making his past history also well-known. I also noticed that Sui had openly published his political views in 2014 (see Sui’s publishing on WQW, 2014) when he was acting as the attorney for Ding Jiaxi, a lawyer who was detained under the charge of illegal assembly and gathering crowds to disturb social order in 2013. I therefore decided to follow his original consent in my research.
Chapter 5 A case study of the 2013 Southern Weekly Incident

In this chapter, the storyline of the Southern Weekly Incident is introduced and different phases of the incident are investigated. The narrative structure starts with the initial phase of information dissemination of the triggering conflict, which is followed by the development phase in which journalists and citizens accelerated online discussion about the event and took various forms of online action to confront online censoring. The following phase is the climax of the case with the radicalisation of action consisting of some citizens and activists’ street protest. The storyline ends with the case winding down, and the delayed testimony episode occurring one year later.

As I have outlined in the previous chapter, the style of storytelling is adopted to maintain the dynamism of my presentation in order to provide a nuanced and readable account of the event. My analytical orientation of this case study is both implicitly illustrated through the way I tell the story, and explicitly revealed in my writing. Specifically, the storyline in this chapter first highlights the ways in which the Internet (Weibo and WeChat specifically in this case) benefitted journalists and citizens’ information acquisition and communication, and the ways in which journalists and citizens adopted the Internet to facilitate online action (e.g. online declaration and petition). Through journalists’ and citizens’ online communication, and through their online collective and individual action, these phases demonstrate a race against post deletion carried out by Weibo users adopting various strategies to challenge online censorship. People’s emotions and embodiment are explored through individuals’ examples (though more analyses are given to this in Chapter 6). The storyline then unfolds with the radicalisation stage, in which I explore the dynamics and obstacles of offline protest, and discuss the interplay between offline action and online voice. Some citizens’ and activists’ personal stories are narrated to help explore the motivational mechanism of radical action, indicating for whom and how, in current China where control has been increasingly tightened, physical radical action may still be mobilised, highlighting the formation and maintenance of networks between people before and after the incident. In this way, I intend to illustrate the dynamics and forming system of the event.

5.1. Information dissemination and online contention

5.1.1. The Internet as the only source

On the evening of 2 January 2013, Lin, a Southern Weekly staff member received a WeChat message which was posted in a WeChat contact group for Southern Weekly staff. The message informed the group that the New Year Edition of Southern Weekly (which was due to be published on 3 January) had been modified and Tuo Zhen, head of the propaganda department of Guangdong province, may be responsible for this action. Photographs of the modified articles were uploaded to the WeChat social network. It was suggested that the modification took place after all edits of the New Year Edition were finalised by Southern Weekly Editorial Department at 3am on 1 January.
When Lin received this message, he was having a New Year gathering with around 20 other colleagues from Southern Media Group in Lijiang, a city 1,264 miles away from Guangzhou where the newspaper is located. Most of this group worked for Southern Metropolis Daily (which also belongs to the Southern Media Group) and Southern Weekly, two of the most liberal newspapers in China. While the liberalists embrace these two newspapers as the bravest media in China for challenging authoritarian governance and promoting constitutionalism in China, Chinese leftists accuse them of colluding with overseas media to demonise China and the Chinese Communist Party. In reports of 2008 Sichuan Earthquake, these two newspapers demanded accountability of the local government for the fatal disaster which killed 69,195 people, and left 18,392 missing (USGS, 2008). Reporting on the Beijing Olympics in the same year, these two newspapers were brave in commenting on some negative issues, which set them apart from other newspapers in China. Since then, they have been labelled as Two South (liangnan) by the left critics, indicating that they are two troublemakers for the authorities.

At the New Year gathering in Lijiang, the news of the modification of the Southern Weekly New Year Edition was shared and anger was immediately sparked among these 20 journalists. Their discussion quickly focused on finding ways of voicing their resistance. As a strategy for efficiently spreading information while minimising risk, it was finally agreed that Southern Metropolis Daily staff (rather than Southern Weekly staff) would post the first messages of the news on Weibo and other people would all help repost them. Huang and Jiang, who worked for Southern Metropolis Daily and who had the largest number of Weibo followers, soon sent out their first messages which were promptly reposted by other people in the group. The messages rapidly triggered reposting and comments by other journalists and editors in Southern Media Group. As Min, a Southern Media Group employee in Shanghai recalls,

‘Their Weibo accounts all contain real name profiles. I am familiar with them and I trusted what they said, so I reposted the Weibo messages. It was not a big thing at the beginning. There were only a few hundred repostings on that night, feeling like an internal discussion within the Southern Media circle, and we thought that this online voice would stop the newspapers being published.’

On the morning of 3 January, Min and his colleagues were surprised to see the newspaper with the modified New Year Edition published as scheduled.

While online rumours about the unethical modification by the propaganda department were still awaiting verification, readers identified other issues on the front page, including mistyped characters and historical inaccuracies. They posted these issues online and associated them with the previous rumours of modification, mocking Minister Tuo's poor level of literacy as shown up by these superficial mistakes.

At the same time, Lin and his colleagues were repeatedly rebuked by senior staff at Southern Media Group who instructed them to delete the Weibo posts and not to repost related information.
The first messages were finally deleted. They did not receive much support from staff of *Southern Weekly* on the night of 2 January and the next day. Public social support was not yet significantly felt. With pressure from above being strongly enhanced, anxiety and concerns about being punished filled the next two days of Lin and his colleagues’ gathering.

Large scale online support finally came after *Southern Weekly* staff validated the rumours that had been circulating on Weibo for two days. At 18:50pm on 3 January, *Southern Weekly* Editorial Department posted an open letter on Weibo in which *Southern Weekly* staff accused the Guangdong Propaganda Department of heavy-handedly interfering in the production and final editing of the New Year Edition, and of modifying the final version after it was finalised. They pointed out five aspects of the published New Year Edition that were allegedly made after finalisation. They also claimed that a number of Weibo accounts of journalists and citizens who participated in the discussion of the incident had been blocked. They demanded thorough investigation of the incident and the re-opening of journalists’ Weibo accounts which were blocked. With journalists and editors of *Southern Weekly* posting more relevant information on Weibo, large scale information fermentation started online. So too did a race against post deletion.

Obviously, an anti-censorship incident such as this is unreportable for mass media including news websites in China. Since news websites owned by either media groups (e.g. people.cn, xinhuanet) or web companies (e.g. Sina, NetEase, Tencent) were all forced to be silent about the incident, social media and online forums became the only source of relevant information. Being then in its heyday, Sina Weibo became the main source of information for Chinese citizens. It was efficiently adopted by *Southern Weekly* staff and other Southern Media staff as a platform for publicising the progress of their investigation and organising online petitions. Many Southern Media staff saw a significant increase in numbers of Weibo followers during the case. A *Southern Weekly* journalist explained that his number of Weibo followers saw an increase of more than 10,000 during the case. Reports on the *Southern Weekly* case from overseas media were also shared on Weibo. Using proxy technologies to access foreign websites, some Chinese citizens regularly picked up overseas reports on the *Southern Weekly* case from the BBC, *The Guardian*, Reuters, CNN, and media from Hong Kong and Singapore and shared them on Weibo. At the later stage when citizens went to protesting outside Southern Media Group office buildings, Weibo seemingly became a live reporting channel by the means of journalists and citizens taking real-time photographs of the protest on the scene and instantly posting them on Weibo.

Later elaboration by the *Southern Weekly* Ethical Committee (a committee formed on 5 January by some *Southern Weekly* staff for the purpose of investigating the modification of the New Year Edition) suggested that the modification of the New Year Edition after finalisation of the newspaper was made in five places over 6 pages. These include the following points and other text changes: the New Year Edition title ‘Dreams of Home-Country’ was replaced by ‘Chasing Dreams’ which directly indicates more optimistic Party values; in the editorial of New Year Greeting, a number of characters were deleted and approximately one hundred characters were added; the artwork on the front page was scaled down and a restrictive description emphasising the evolution of the spirits of the Party was printed as a preface beside the artwork; on Page 3 the article ‘Guangzhou teens shown their patriotic actions rationally (at anti-Japanese demonstrations)’ was removed. A *Southern Weekly* advertising image took its place.
In the face of Weibo’s warrior position on the frontline, WeChat as a relatively private social networking tool became another popular information disclosure platform working behind the scenes. Given that the regulation of WeChat at the beginning of 2013 was relatively loose with much less message deletion being seen compared to Weibo, Southern Media Journalists used WeChat groups as the main platform for instant internal communication. For example, the WeChat groups Southern Weekly after 90s (a group formed of 49 journalists who joined Southern Weekly after 1990s – including some who have already left Southern Weekly) and Southern Media 2006 (a group formed by around 40 Southern Media staff members who attended company training together when they started their employment in Southern Media Group in 2006) were then flooded with discussion about the incident. New WeChat groups of varied size were specifically formed for communicating information about the incident. There emerged big groups consisting of almost all Southern Media staff, and small ones formed within particular departments (such as the Southern Weekly Editorial Department group). Some Southern Weekly journalists provided timely information about the incident in these various networking groups and called for group members to repost particular Weibo messages to support Southern Weekly.

WeChat groups assembled information from various sources which helped journalists predict the authorities’ decisions. As a journalist stated in an interview, ‘we assembled all sorts of information from our personal networks, and we discussed the information on WeChat and judged the authenticity and reliability of the information’. Through WeChat networking groups, journalists in Guangzhou passed information to other Southern Media staff in other cities, as well as to former Southern Media employees. More importantly, discussion in WeChat groups within Southern Media played a significant role in planning online action such as sending out open letters and organising co-signing for an online petition.

Certainly, the public also accessed information about the Southern Weekly Incident from WeChat. Arguably, information was received efficiently through citizens’ friend circles which, for individuals, were formed by like-minded people sharing their similar opinions and attitudes towards the incident.

5.1.2. Online collective and individual action

Through sharing and discussing information on Weibo and WeChat, journalists and citizens then quickly accelerated online contention, sending out more collective and individual messages. On 4 January, three open letters respectively addressed to Southern Weekly former staff, Southern Media staff, and citizens were circulated on Weibo calling for signature support. These open

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12 Besides WeChat’s key function of sending and receiving instant text messages, pictures, voice messages (similar to WhatsApp) on mobile devices, one of the differences between Weibo and WeChat is the level of publicness of people’s posts. Weibo exercises one-to-all broadcast in the way that people on Weibo do not need to follow each other to see their posts. A particular account can be accessed by people who do not follow the account. In Weibo, posts which are reposted can be seen by the sender’s followers who may not be the original account’s followers. While in WeChat, a user can only see posts from the accounts he/she follows. Public accounts of organisations are separate and their posts are not fed to the same interface where friends’ posts are. Therefore, WeChat provides a more intimate feel of networking with known friends (Lien and Cao, 2014).
letters were drafted by journalists and former journalists of Southern Media Group. They criticised the propaganda minister’s censoring of the New Year Edition as an act overstepping his remit and demanded that the minister should take the blame and resign – one of the letters requested an apology to be publicly made by the minister. They raised the claims that Southern Weekly staff’s resistance should be acknowledged and no punishment of the relevant people should be made. They urged authorities to reopen the Weibo accounts which were closed or blocked. A few hours later, more than 70 Southern Media staff and more than 50 Southern Weekly former staff emailed their names to co-sign the open letters. The open letter addressed to citizens received 3,000 signatures within two days, and new signatures were constantly updated on Weibo.

On 5 January, Southern Weekly staff posted another open letter, declaring the establishment of a Southern Weekly Ethics Committee for investigating the incident. They accused the authorities of blocking more Weibo accounts and called for the reopening of those accounts. They also claimed that 1,034 articles of Southern Weekly were deleted or significantly modified before publication by the propaganda department in 2012 (for a weekly newspaper, this means about 20 articles per issue).

On the night of 6 January, Southern Weekly’s official Weibo account was seized by the senior staff of the newspaper and this episode marked the climax of online contention in this case, leading some people to protest outside the office buildings of Southern Media. Weibo itself formed a stage for this show. At 9:18pm, Wu Wei, the executive officer of Southern Weekly’s New Media business, posted the following statement on Weibo:

@Feng Duan (6 January, at 21:18):
I have handed in the password of Sina Weibo account @Southern Weekly to Mao Zhe, General Manager of Southern Weekly’s New Media business. I will not be responsible for the following statement and any future content posted by the account.

Wu’s statement was censored and removed shortly after by Sina Weibo.

Two minutes after Wu posted the statement, Southern Weekly’s official Weibo account sent out a statement of clarification:

@Southern Weekly (6 January, at 21:20):
To our readers: The New Year Greeting we published in the January 3rd New Year Edition was written by our editors under the theme of Chasing Dreams; the preface on the front page was written by one of our directors. The related rumours on the Internet are untrue. We apologise to our readers for the mistakes we made due to our negligence in the haste.
This statement, denying the interference of the Guangdong Propaganda Department in the production and publication of the New Year Edition, apparently intended to interrupt further demands of the accountability of the propaganda department. It provoked strong criticism from spectators. Emotions of disappointment and anger soon spread on Weibo.

Following this, Southern Weekly staff members successively posted messages calling for clarification. However, these Weibo posts were soon censored and removed by Sina Weibo. The intensity triggered a strike threat made by editorial staff of Southern Weekly’s Economy Edition at 9:49pm.

At 11:04 pm, a statement signed by 97 Southern Weekly staff members was posted on Weibo, declaring that the Southern Weekly’s official Weibo account was taken over forcibly and the post ‘To our readers…’ was untrue.

Updated investigation reports of the Southern Weekly Incident signed by Southern Weekly Ethics Committee were posted on Weibo on 7 January. At 2.30am, a report was posted to reveal the two-day struggle within Southern Weekly in which the Chief Editor first commanded his staff to post the untrue information on the official Weibo account and then forcibly seized the account from the account’s manager after his request was rejected. At this point, the incident was intensified to a higher level with journalists in the whole Southern Media Group being enraged and online supporters being mobilised.

Later on 7 January, the recently-formed Southern Weekly Ethics Committee posted another investigation report into the Southern Weekly Incident, thoroughly reviewing what happened during the production of the New Year Edition and the modifications after the newspaper had been finalised. It elaborated the huge pressure created by the censoring from above (including the Chief Editor’s personal suggestion and instructions from Guangdong Propaganda Department) that was put on reporters of Southern Weekly during the month when New Year Edition was produced. It revealed that under the pressure from the propaganda officers, the Chief Editor and vice Chief Editor of Southern Weekly worked overtime on 1 January at the publication department and modified six pages. As one of the Southern Weekly staff commented in my interview, it was the violation of normal working procedures – ‘they added and changed content by themselves without going through the usual editing and proofreading process’ – that finally caused the mistakes to be published in the newspaper. The report was quickly removed, although journalists and citizens online repeatedly posted it during the continual deletion.

It is worth noting that journalists’ collective activities of posting statements, making declarations, and organising petitions were not taken without planning. They were at least loosely organised, following discussions on WeChat.

Citizens’ cooperation with journalists’ collective activities was an essential component of the online collective action. They offered their signatures to participate in petitions, and at the same
time reposted and commented on declarations and statements to spread information and show support. Without citizens’ individual contribution, the large scale collective voice in this incident could not be formed and journalists’ voice may only have remained in the media circle.

By discussing collective action in this research, I understood it as being implemented in at least two forms. Besides declarations and statements made collectively by journalists and responded by citizens, Weibo posts sent to express personal opinions on individual Weibo accounts contributed greatly to the collective online voice which is another form of collective action. Individuals involved in discussing the incident were mobilised by each other’s posts and their voices together created and enhanced the momentum of online collective action. Here, some examples are provided to demonstrate how individuals’ voices contributed to dynamics of the Southern Weekly Incident.

Zhen was an investigative news reporter of Southern Weekly. During the Southern Weekly Incident, he intensively posted his experience with newspaper censorship on Weibo, highlighting the brutal way of censoring carried out by the Chief Editor of Southern Weekly. For example, he mentioned that political issues at one time caused hundreds of thousands copies of Southern Weekly to be destroyed before distribution and a huge financial loss was incurred by the newspaper. As Zhen admitted, he was aware of the limited space allowed in 140-character messages and consciously chose relatively sensational stories to generate powerful effects among the public. He asked one of his celebrity friends to repost one of his messages. Within less than three hours, the message reposted by the celebrity gained around 40,000 reposts.

Zeng Li was a content examiner (shenduyuan, a news censoring role inside a particular Chinese media organisation, responsible for media ‘self-monitoring’ before work is submitted to the official censors above) at Southern Weekly. His two blog articles on 3 January and 6 January were generated as long Weibo images and widely shared on Weibo. On 3 January, Zeng posted a blog article entitled ‘Only because of one post, my Weibo account was closed’. As he wrote, he posted on Weibo discussing the ways in which the provincial propaganda Minister controlled Southern Weekly. About 2,000 people reposted or commented on this Weibo post within three hours. Then his Weibo post was deleted together with some of his previous posts. He then posted a Weibo image showing his Weibo posts and comments that had been deleted. In less than 10 minutes, his Weibo account was closed down. Zeng claimed that around 15 Weibo accounts of Southern Weekly staff were closed down at a similar time. On 6 January, Zeng wrote another blog article entitled ‘Who Revised the New Year’s Greeting at Southern Weekly?’. The article introduced readers to how, on a routine basis, censoring of Southern Weekly newspaper was procedurally conducted by content examiners, the Chief Editor of Southern Weekly, senior staff

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13 A single Weibo post is limited to 140 Chinese characters, though 140 Chinese characters usually contain more information than the same number of English letters. The ‘Long Weibo’ feature of Weibo enables users to upload an article up to 10,000 Chinese characters by generating the article as an image for sharing. Weibo users can directly browse a long Weibo post by clicking the image, without needing to access an external website from hyperlinks.
in Southern Media Group, and propaganda officers. He also revealed that each issue of Southern Weekly saw at least 2 to 3 articles, sometimes 7 to 8, removed, and more than 10 significantly modified. Many Southern Weekly journalists regarded Zeng's online confession about his work as evidence from an insider about the censoring of Southern Weekly and quickly reposted the information to show their anger. For Chinese citizens who were not working in media, it was the first time that censorship tactics had been brought to light by an insider.

Lai, who works in the Commentary Department in Southern Weekly and regularly got in touch with readers of Southern Weekly, received a great number of private Weibo messages sent by readers showing their support. He anonymised the senders and posted these messages (with the agreement of the senders) on his Weibo account. These posts demonstrated a coherent supporting voice from different fields.

With numerous Weibo posts being promptly deleted, people’s online contention during the incident took a peculiar approach to promoting information dissemination. Journalists and citizens formed a ‘post relay’ on Weibo to race against the relentless post deletion. This vital part of online action demonstrates the extremely intensive dynamics of online contention in China.

5.1.3. Truth! Truth! - a race against deletion

‘You know, every media account on Weibo is assigned to a particular inspector. The person [who monitors the account] often calls me immediately after I post something that is regarded as being sensitive.’

This is what Tao, the manager of a magazine’s official Weibo account, said when he displayed the Weibo user account page of the magazine to me. The page he opened was labelled ‘media version’ and on the side of the page there was a column entitled ‘dedicated customer service’ where a name and a contact number were provided, looking very different from a normal Weibo account page. As Tao continued to explain,

‘Very often, the posts I send can only be seen by myself, just like they are self-shielded. I can tell that they are blocked when I find that the number of “read” is only zero or one. I have called this number [the dedicated phone number] a few times to argue with the person, stressing that the post does not contain any sensitive information and asking him to check again…. There is also somebody from the Cyber Division in Guangdong Propaganda Department calling me frequently. He normally points out that our official Weibo account has sent out an inappropriate message and commands me to delete the message. Or sometimes, he points out that there are, below our messages, some negative comments on the Party which need to be deleted. There was once I asked him on the phone, “Don’t you feel meaningless to do this every day?” He said, “We all have to do the job. I have no choice”.'
Like other media in China, the magazine Tao was working for was repressed from expressing support on Weibo during the *Southern Weekly* Incident.

Individual posts which were identified as containing sensitive words were deleted within seconds after they were posted. According to CDT Chinese, which runs a project\(^\text{14}\) that crowd-sources filtered keywords on Sina Weibo, the following terms were among those unsearchable on Weibo on 3 January: ‘Tuo Zhen’ (the name of Guangdong Propaganda Minister) and words that sound like ‘Tuo Zhen’ (people adopted homophones and near-homophones to refer to the name\(^\text{15}\)), ‘Chidu’ (which is synonymous with the Chinese character ‘Tuo’ and literally means ‘measurement’ or ‘scale’ - People online started calling Tuo Zhen ‘Chidu Minister’ during the incident, implying association with Tuo’s censoring work), ‘China dream’, ‘dream of constitutionalism’ (the earlier version the New Year Greeting was entitled ‘China's Dream, the Dream of Constitutionalism’), ‘Guangdong Propaganda Department’, ‘*Southern Weekly* New Year's Greeting’, and ‘Nanzhou New Year’s Greeting’ (Nanzhou is an abbreviation for *Southern Weekly*). On 4 January, words like ‘open letter’, ‘Dayu Flood Control’ (an ancient Chinese story told in the published New Year Edition in which a historical mistake was made) were added to the blocked list. On 6 January, each of the four individual characters in the newspaper name, as well as ‘nfzm’ which stands for ‘Nanfang Zhoumo’ (the Chinese name of *Southern Weekly*) were blocked.

Relentless post deletion and the closure of many Weibo accounts caused people's outrage and frustration. These emotions were expressed online, demonstrating an air of resignation. As the following posts show,

**@Wang Xing WX (January, at 21:57, shown as a screenshot):**

System administrator: Sorry. The Weibo you posted at 2013-02-01 20:25:41 ... has been encrypted by the manager. This Weibo is not appropriate to be publicised. If you need help, please contact customer service...

System administrator: Sorry. The Weibo you posted at 2013-02-01 20:29:59 ... has been encrypted by the manager. This Weibo is not appropriate to be publicised. If you need help, please contact customer service...

\(^{14}\) In April 2011, China Digital Times Chinese began tracking keywords blocked in Sina Weibo search results and collecting them on a public Google spreadsheet. This is introduced on CDT website http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/06/grass-mud-horse-list/

The spreadsheet can be viewed at: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0Aqe87wrWj9w_dFpJWjZoM19BNkFfV2JrWS1pMEtYcEE#gid=0

\(^{15}\) I introduce citizens' strategies to circumvent Weibo censorship in the *Southern Weekly* Incident in the next section.
System administrator: Sorry. The Weibo you posted at 2013-02-01 19:12:13 ... has been encrypted by the manager. This Weibo is not appropriate to be publicised. If you need help, please contact customer service…'

The author presented this screenshot of his Weibo page to show the quick reaction of Weibo administrators to his successive posting. Similar demonstration can be seen from the following narratives:

@Xiao Dang (5 January):
Just logged on to Weibo, got 48 deletion notices.

@Kao Er La GZ (6 January, at 10:45):
‘Sorry. This Weibo is not appropriate to be publicised.’ Browsing Weibo, this sentence is the most seen ... most of the posts about Southern Weekly Incident became like this. It may be one of the weeks when online post deletion was most heavily conducted. Yet, Tuo himself is so calm, showing no reaction. We should thank Tuo as he woke us up from the fog of New Policy [referring to the proposed policies of Xi’s new leadership].

The sticker of a candle image was one of the most popular expressions used by Weibo users to pass information about a particular Weibo account being shut down (e.g. used with the text ‘**was killed’) and to show their anger and frustration. A one word Weibo post ‘Test’ (suggesting that the user was checking whether his/her Weibo account was still ‘alive’) was often seen from many accounts during the Southern Weekly Incident.

Resistance was soon widely demonstrated. As I have mentioned, the content examiner Zeng Li was triggered by the closure of his and his colleagues' Weibo accounts to post blog articles which revealed the procedural conduct of internal censoring of Southern Weekly. As Zeng explained in one of the articles, ‘when the Southern Weekly Incident was on fire online, the Weibo accounts of many Southern Weekly staff were blocked, including myself. I can no longer be silent’. Reposting to pass information is certainly a popular technique for resistance. A Southern Media journalist, whose Weibo account was followed by more than 6,000 people, recalled that she frequently communicated throughout the Southern Weekly Incident with her friend Liu, who was a former Southern Media commentator and had more than 10,000 Weibo followers. They made an agreement to repost each other's messages during the incident, in order to spread information out through their Weibo followers.

On a broader scale, Weibo users formed a large-scale reposting relay to keep information flowing throughout the incident. They attempted to utilise the few seconds or minutes before the deletion in order to spread information to other accounts, thus lengthening the lifespan of posts. Verified
by Sina\textsuperscript{16} for their journalist identity, journalists’ accounts attracted huge groups of followers thus efficiently facilitating the spread of information in the \textit{Southern Weekly} Incident. As a \textit{Southern Weekly} journalist explained,

‘Though media people may not be big “V” like superstars or other public figures, we are at least small “V” or medium “V” [big, medium, and small in a metaphoric sense]. Lots of my media friends have more than 20,000 Weibo followers. Their social influence is huge.’

Many journalists shared this recognition that they were privileged in promoting the incident through huge personal networks, as they revealed in my interviews. The technique of reposting to maintain the flowing of information was most actively adopted on the night of 6 January after the official account of \textit{Southern Weekly} was seized, and the online resistance reached its climax on that night. As many journalists and citizens in my interviews revealed, they stayed up for the whole night of 6 January to check updated information about the \textit{Southern Weekly} Incident. They reposted messages from \textit{Southern Weekly} staff, hoping to quickly pass the information before it was deleted. The atmosphere can be captured from a \textit{Southern Weekly} journalist’s repeated and continuous posting during the night.

\textit{@Lin Jiao Yi Men:}

Please spread it far and wide. Thank friends who care about and support us.

Every few minutes, the journalist posted this message together with his colleagues’ statements which declared the information sent by the official account was untrue. As he stated in one of the post, he believed that information on Weibo, after it was widely diffused, was not possible to be completely cleared by censors.

At the time of writing, many of my interviewees’ Weibo pages on 6 and 7 January 2013 showed the full screen of deletion notices ‘Sorry, the Weibo post has been deleted by the author…’; ‘Sorry, this Weibo post is not appropriate to be publicised. If you need help, please contact customer service.’

On 7 January at 4:06 am, a manager at Sina Weibo posted a message on his Weibo account \textit{@Zhengban Yu Yang} (See ‘\textit{Weibo Censorship and Southern Weekly}’ (CDT, 2013e) for the full Weibo text of this post). As he explains, the storm of attacks, condemnation and blame for Sina had ‘grown to a fevered pitch’ and made him no longer able to hold back the anger, needing to explain to the public so that they ‘can understand the facts of the matter’. As he wrote,

‘If [Sina] did not delete certain Weibo posts, then that would probably mean entire topics would be deemed off limits. Weibo is a public platform. No one

\textsuperscript{16} Sina Weibo has an identification policy similar to Twitter’s. Sina verifies famous persons and organisations’ identities and attaches a colourful V to the usernames of the verified accounts. Many media workers can apply for and achieve verification of their Weibo accounts.
can deny how Weibo has changed our lives in terms of society, government, as a means of quickly and conveniently expressing public opinion, etc. The problem is, on one end we have over 100 million public Weibo users, but the other end is not Sina…. that special group of knee-jerk reactionary bureaucrats have been able to throw up the yellow light and deduct points any time they so pleased. They really have no responsibility to consider public opinion whatsoever. They could institute a “game over” for Weibo as effortlessly as smashing an ant. So when they issue the 18th Golden Edict, you have no choice but to execute their demands….a certain amount of sacrifice is necessary to reap some gain. This is the kind of country we live in. There are all kinds of special, sensitive restraints placed on us. The game can only be played well by staying within the bounds of the rules.’

This expression revealed Sina’s difficult position under the pressure imposed on them by the propaganda department, and pointed to the fundamental conflicts between the authorities who pay little attention to public opinion when it comes to maintaining political regulation, and Sina as an Internet business which cares about customers. It forcefully stressed that Sina has no choice but to grasp the barrel of its gun up a notch. As he put it,

‘…the strategic relationship between comment deletion and the dissemination of information. I posit the following question to you all: You are all crazily posting Weibo messages, and those “little secretaries” are busily deleting them all. But with the situation as it is, has your ability to see this information been hindered? If they didn’t delete individual Weibo posts, they would just directly shut down entire accounts. Wouldn’t that limit our worry even more? Wouldn’t that let us feel like real smart alecs? Hasn’t everyone already seen the post before it was deleted? For all of those who have had their Weibo posts deleted, have your accounts been shut down? Many of you are veteran Internet users. So you know Internet technology, you know that deleting something seconds after it is posted is not a big deal. There’s always more than one side to things. Everyone should consider this carefully.

…In fact, pressure already exists right when, and even before, a situation breaks out. But we can deal with it. The fact that all information can make it out represents a hard-fought victory in itself’.

This long Weibo message had since been removed. The account @Zhengban Yu Yang soon disappeared (CDT, 2013e; FreeWeibo, 2013).

On the morning of 7 January, Global Times, which is a subsidiary of People’s Daily and is well-known for its strongly nationalistic and pro-government slant (CDT, 2008; Branigan, 2009),
published an editorial entitled ‘Southern Weekly’s ‘Message to Readers’ Is Food for Thought Indeed’. This editorial attributed ‘foreign forces’, in particular Chen Guangcheng, a blind Chinese civil rights activist who worked on human rights issues as a lawyer in rural China and has been under asylum in the USA since 2012, for the sparking and promotion of incidents. The article ends with a forceful comment:

Whether these people [journalists and protesters] are willing to accept it or not, this is common sense: given China’s social and political realities, the kind of “free media” that these people dream of simply cannot exist. All of China’s media can develop only to the extent China does, and media reform is part of China’s overall reform, and the media absolutely will not become a “political special zone” of China…Even in the West, the mainstream media does not choose to openly oppose the government (Global Voices, 2013).\(^\text{17}\)

On the evening of 7 January 2013, a censoring instruction, issued to the media by central government authorities, was leaked and distributed online. The instruction pointed out that Party control of media was ‘an unwavering basic principle’. The instruction demanded media organisations and departments to ensure employees stop voicing support for Southern Weekly online. The instruction also asserted that Guangdong Propaganda Department Minister Tuo Zhen should not be blamed for the incident and external hostile forces were involved in the incident. The instruction commanded ‘media and websites in all locales’ to ‘prominently republish the Global Times editorial ‘Southern Weekly’s ‘Message to Readers’ Is Food for Thought Indeed’ (CDT, 2013d). It was obvious that the Central Propaganda Department was determined to ban the discussion of Southern Weekly Incident in public media by asserting the nature of the case as political dissent, and endorsed to guide the direction of public voice and manipulate public opinions.

Under huge pressure, main news websites including Sina, NetEase, Sohu, and Tencent and more than ten mainstream newspapers in China complied by reprinting the Global Times editorial on 8 January and 9 January. These newspapers were respectively based in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Chengdu, Hanzhou, Changsha and all were nationally distributed. To distance themselves from the views of the editorial, many media added statements at the end of the reprinted article to state that the views in the article did not represent their stance. For example, Tencent stated, ‘Publishing this article does not mean Tencent agrees with their views or confirms the content’ at the end of the reprint (Tencent, 2013); Sina’s publication also included the following

\(^{17}\) For a whole version of the editorial of Global Times entitled ‘Southern Weekly’s ‘Message to Readers’ Is Food for Thought Indeed’, see the English version entitled ‘Southern Weekly issue prompts soul-searching over media’s role’ published on the English edition of Global Times http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/754392.shtml. Although the English version is not strictly in accordance to the Chinese version (the English edition of Global Times has been long been regarded as taking a less strident approach), it follows the general points.
statement – ‘Declaration: Sina publishes this article for the purpose of passing more information. It does not mean Sina agrees with their views or confirms the content’ (Sina, 2013).

Yet, media in Southern Media Group and some other media refused to reprint the Global Times editorial. A confrontation taking place in Beijing News created another emotional wave on Weibo. Beijing News was co-founded by Guangming Daily18 and Southern Media Group in 2003, with staff originally from Southern Media Group as the main editors and journalists. In September 2011 it was announced that Beijing News was moved under direct control of the Beijing municipal propaganda department. At midnight on 9 January 2013, Beijing News received a visit from a Beijing propaganda officer after it refused to publish the Global Times editorial. The official reportedly warned that the newspaper would be banned from publication if the editorial was not included, and threatened to dissolve Beijing News press if it did not comply with the republishing instruction (CDT, 2013a). As a journalist from Beijing News recalled, the proprietor of the newspaper Dai Zigeng organised a vote among on-duty editors and journalists to decide whether or not to comply with the propaganda order. With the vote in favour of ‘not reprinting’, Dai stood in a stalemate with the Beijing Propaganda officer and finally submitted an oral resignation in the office. Beijing News eventually reprinted the editorial, renaming it ‘Global Times published an editorial about “the Southern Weekly incident”. The signature of editor-in-duty was left blank.

Photographs were uploaded to Weibo by some Beijing News staff to show the progress of the drama taking place in Beijing News press. These photographs showed a dismal atmosphere with many staff in tears. They were widely forwarded by other media workers with comments to show support and encouragement. At the same time, posts that accused Global Times of disgracefully and shamefully cheating the audience quickly filled Weibo. The following post, as one of the responses to the criticism, was posted by a key editor in Global Times:

@Wangwen Pinglun (9 January):
Many people are scolding us… Let me tell you: many years later, your words on Weibo will definitely disappear. When people review the history, they will only find the record on the printed Global Times … This is our contribution to history…

This message may appear to be irrational, but summed up the daunting challenges faced by Chinese Internet users in pursuing truth. It ironically reflected many people’s concern about the fatal effects of Weibo deletion in many social affairs in digital China. Under the Party’s forceful guidance of controlling irresponsible rumours, truth remained a puzzle in many Chinese affairs.

5.1.4. ‘You know what I mean’ (ni dong de)
A relay-form of posting and reposting might be the most direct way of challenging Weibo censoring, while creatively using homophones, punctuation marks, reference items, word

separation, and images to get round the filtering system is a common skill employed by Chinese citizens’ in their daily Weibo usage. This type of skill was well demonstrated in the Southern Weekly Incident. Expressing themselves in creative and artful ways, Chinese citizens intended to strategically avoid political punishment.

Over the week in January 2013, Weibo was awash with the logo of Southern Weekly. Weibo users changed their profile photos to the logo of Southern Weekly to support the newspaper. Referring to the minister Tuo Zhen, Weibo users replaced the propaganda minister’s surname with a homophonic alternative which is a measure word normally associated with faeces. An image depicting a pile of faeces was used to make comments that condemned the propaganda official. ‘No. 289 Yard’ was widely used by current and previous journalists working in Southern Media Group to refer to the company by its address on Guangzhou Avenue. The text ‘just walked pass No. 289 Yard…’ and ‘come on, No. 289’ was written as captions to photographs of the gathering and protests outside the office buildings of Southern Media Group, which were uploaded online to report the protest (the protest will be introduced in the next section).

The Chinese writing tradition chunqiu bifa which is used to express critical opinions in subtle ways was adopted during the incident to avoid direct confrontation. A number of examples demonstrate this. People online reviewed meaningful sentences that were published in New Year Greetings of previous years and made linguistic changes to those sentences to ridicule the current political environment. Caijing Website (website of the popular magazine Caijing) on Weibo @Caijing Wang posted a message entitled ‘Wei-dictionary’, explaining the meaning of the Chinese character ‘Tuo’, implying from the literal meaning of the character that a person should restrict his behaviour and crossing lines would invite humiliation himself. A photograph of an elephant with chains on its legs was uploaded by a well-known journalist to Weibo with the caption: ‘people who chain you may not necessarily be stronger than you.’ (7 January). A popular Chinese movie star on Monday, 7 January posted:

@Li Bingbing (7 January, at 09:38):

Good morning. Working on a roll for 8 days, weekend is not weekend, but Monday is still Monday. Good morning. There’s no heating in the South. Take care everyone. Good morning. Waiting for spring in the cold winter.

‘Weekend’ here was soon interpreted as referring to Southern Weekly as, in Chinese, the name of the paper is Southern Weekend. In less than 20 minutes, this post had accumulated 57,121 reposts and 21,605 comments.

On 9 January, an article entitled ‘Porridge from the South’ in a Beijing weekly was widely reposted on Weibo. The author described his love of porridge from South China. In Chinese, the word ‘porridge’ is a homophone of ‘Zhou’, a character in Southern Weekly’s name. Readers interpreted the author's fondness for southern porridge as implying a fondness for the beleaguered newspaper.
Using quotes and poetry is typical in exercising *chunqiu bifa*. As the following examples show,

**@Southern People Weekly (6 January, at 22:45):**

History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamour of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people. -- Martin Luther King, Jr.

Within less than 90 minutes, this post was reposted 68,736 times and commented on 13,212 times, encouraging people to stand up.

**@Yao Chen (7 January, 23:20):**

One word of truth shall outweigh the whole world. -- Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

(Russian)

The movie star and Weibo celebrity (among the first celebrities to open a Weibo account) Yao Chen quoted the sentence from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (a Russian novelist, dramatist and historian) when she also attached the brand avatar of *Southern Weekly* below the text. This quote was once used by *Southern Weekly* as the title of 2006 New Year Greeting, thus effectively generating readers’ association with *Southern Weekly*. It also showed the accusation of the authorities spreading untrue information. In less than 7 minutes, this post accumulated 96,945 reposts and 32,091 comments.

Satirising the authorities through various forms of story writing, poems, and cartoons in the *Southern Weekly* Incident created entertaining effects that promoted a large number of reposts. On 4 January, when asked about the *Southern Weekly* Incident on a news conference of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, Hua Chunying, the spokeswoman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said she did not know the specific circumstances about the incident but she emphasised: ‘In China, no so-called news censorship system exists. The Chinese government protects journalistic freedom according to the law’ (The Washington Post, 2013). An image showing her aggressive gesture while making this speech was widely forwarded on Weibo to mock the authorities with text like ‘There’s no censorship in China. Believe it or not!’.

After *Global Times* accused foreign forces of supporting the *Southern Weekly* protest, people associated this accusation with similar situation in previous events. The excuse of ‘the interference of foreign forces’ had been frequently adopted by the Party when they intended to shut down discussion of some domestic affairs, with a warning that further discussion may cause danger for citizens. The term ‘foreign forces’ became one of the attacking targets in citizens’ creative posts.

**@Li Wan (7 January):**

“I am a blind person, but you framed me for peeping at national secrets...” --

<Chinese 007>
@Li Chengpeng (8 January):
These foreign forces are evil indeed. They live among the rich in the US, but aggressively interfere in China’s domestic affairs. They stole money from Chinese people, and stored it in Swiss banks. Their sons and daughters drive Ferraris themselves and never care about tragedies of school buses in China. Most hatefully, they manipulate some Chinese media, and when they saw Chinese citizens pursuing constitutionalism that has long been advocated by Mao Zedong, they scolded these citizens as traitors and sent them to re-education through labour. Let’s seize these foreign forces quickly!

The author of the first post mocked that the accusation against Chen Guangcheng was as dramatic as a Chinese James Bond story. In the second post, the author furiously pointed out that many Party leaders had reportedly committed serious corruption and shifted their wealth overseas, implying that the Party were the real ‘foreign forces’ that needed to be accused.

A few portraits that were titled ‘foreign forces’ and similarly attributed this term to corrupt Chinese leaders’ hiding their possessions abroad were popular with many reposts on Weibo. Red coloured underwear which was labelled ‘foreign forces’ was marked by the text ‘the omnipresent underwear that is used to cover all the shame’. The famous cartoonist Kuang Biao created a cartoon showing a monstrous man facing a mirror with the caption of ‘You, the forces outside the mirror (the phrase ‘forces outside the mirror’ is homophonic to ‘foreign forces’), still do not admit it?’ This also satirised the authorities by pointing out their self-humiliation in the accusation of foreign forces.

Artful photography was also taken and put on Weibo to convey good wishes to the newspaper. A popularly forwarded photograph was taken outside the office buildings of Southern Media Group, focusing on two big characters ‘Ping An’ (means ‘safe’) on an advertisement board for an insurance company and with Southern Weekly’s sign on top of the building as the background. Similar, a photograph showing the bright sun light shining on the sign of Southern Weekly, was posted with the text ‘Sun light is shining on your face, while the warmness remains in our hearts’, a well-remembered sentence in the 1999 New Year Greeting of Southern Weekly.

News websites, while prohibited from reporting on the event, showed their support via intentional ways of content and format design on their websites. Without specifically discussing the Southern Weekly Incident, the website of NetEase ran a feature that collected each year’s Southern Weekly New Year Greeting. A classical Chinese intellectual game of composing acrostic poetry was skilfully played by news portals run by Sina, NetEase, Sohu, Tianya and Yicai. On 7 January and 8 January, Website viewers found that the first characters of each article title in the same column formed a vertical sentence, which read ‘Go ahead, Southern Weekly!’, ‘Hold on, Southern Weekly!’ etc. This type of interesting design was quickly identified by Weibo users and discussed on Weibo.

In summary, Weibo users in the Southern Weekly Incident, using various skills to circumvent online censorship, demonstrated the capacity of diffusing sensitive information while keeping it
unspoken and unwritten. The effectiveness of these skills relied on cultural consensus among Chinese citizens who understood the hidden information contained in each other’s words. This is summed up by the phrase ‘you know what I mean’ (ni dong de), which was usually seen at the end of Weibo posts. When this phrase first became popular on the Chinese Internet and meant ‘there is something complicated that I do not need to explicitly explain to you but I am sure you know what I mean, as you must have also experienced this’. Apparently, another level of meaning had been attached to this phrase when using it in online dissidence, implying inexplicit meanings that are unspoken under online censorship.

To summarise the information dissemination and people’s online action in the Southern Weekly Incident, I would like to point out the role of the Internet as both a communication tool and a social space which I introduced earlier. Relying on the use of the Internet, the information of the modification incident first went out of the internal circle of Southern Weekly, then beyond Southern Media Group to the whole country. To be sure, every transition of the information flowing was promoted by particular human agencies, involving journalists’ initial decision to spread the information, their determination in confronting the authorities’ misleading accusation, and people’s adoption of various skills to race against deletion. The online action in the Southern Weekly Incident aggregated elements that were important in traditional street protests which had been strictly restricted in China. Staff of the Southern Media Group published statements and declarations about the facts of the Southern Weekly Incident and sent out open letters to ask for support from citizens in ways similar to the organisation of conventional street protests. Citizens reposted declarations and statements and signed petitions to enhance online voice, which resembled methods of creating momentum in traditional street protests. Through these online activities, public voices were collected and broadcast to the public and the authorities. On the one hand, Weibo was used like a loudspeaker for mobilisation and communication. On the other hand, Weibo formed an arena, as the ‘battle’ over the seizure of the official Weibo account clearly demonstrated, similar to offline physical space for the action to unfold.

In Chapter 6 I will further analyse emotions, embodiment, the logic of connective action, and other mechanisms which facilitated both these online activities and the offline protest during the Southern Weekly Incident. Now let me continue to narrate the incident by introducing the offline protest, which radicalised action.

5.2. Go to the street?

5.2.1. ‘I could be arrested’

‘Why should we go to the street? We journalists have given our voice out and generated emotion for the whole society. We journalists have finished our part, and the rest is not up to us. Isn’t this the strategy? Once we went to protest, we would be arrested.’
These were Pin’s thoughts on the night of 6 January when he witnessed some citizens online discussing about going to protest, after they were provoked by the seizure of Southern Weekly’s official Weibo account. Pin was a senior member of Southern Media staff.

Citizens’ posts about going to present yellow chrysanthemums to mourn the death of the newspaper the next day outside the office buildings of Southern Media were quickly reposted. Lyrics of a song which some people planned to sing in the protest were widely circulated. But Pin explained in my interview,

‘I of course understand those people’s passion. But I have been working in this career for more than 10 years. I have sacrificed so much. I have compromised the passion, the reports I wanted to write, only for staying in this career. You should not expect me to protest. You should not use this big stick of morality to drive me. Once I sacrificed myself, what I earned would be only your one word of “well done!”’

No journalists from Southern Media Group participated in the street protest which took place in the next three days. In my interviews, many journalists honestly expressed their willingness to keep their jobs under the current censorship system rather than risk unemployment and even prison. A journalist, who himself had previously initiated a few cases of online petition, revealed that once offline action proceeded, both the protester’s online and offline action would be restricted, his online account may be shut down and personal life activities would also be limited. As a journalist of Southern Weekly pointed out, ‘What we need to do is, to develop the case online to the maximum, whilst ensuring the development remains only online.’ Many journalists also suspected the effectiveness of street protests, quoting from their past experience of witnessing other protests. Some journalists suggested that people’s radical action, bearing the good will of supporting the newspaper, would by necessity bear the idea of sacrificing the newspaper, and would eventually destroy the newspaper. Moreover, as many journalists added in interviews, they did not see an organiser or a key actor who could possibly mobilise the whole media circle.

I will discuss journalists’ self-restriction further in Chapter 7. In a general sense, distancing themselves from street politics was the bottom line for most people in the incident, regardless of how active they were online.

However, Yan, a mid-aged university lecturer, decided to ‘have a look at the protest’. As he explained,

‘I am too old to feel the impulse of doing something radical. But I am still interested in observing. I have been to most of the protesting events in Guangzhou. I just wanted to take some photos, show the photos to other people, in particular my students, to let them know something is happening outside. I always feel sad that today our students know very little about what’s
actually happening in this country. I made friends with people in those events. Now those friends usually send me a message when they know an event is taking place.'

Yan went to Southern Media on his own, but he found many of his friends also on the site, including a few charity workers, a previous student who had been active in a few other social events, and an individual drama producer whom Yan had come across a few times at other protest events. Yan took photos of the yellow chrysanthemums clutched by citizens and many banner signs that said ‘freedom of expression is not a crime’ and ‘Chinese people want freedom’, and uploaded the photos to Weibo.

The drama producer, who also participated in my interviews, explained that he also identified many of his friends on the site, including a few musicians and former journalists. As he explained, ‘Who can define what is called participation? We didn’t do anything. We were all just looking on.’

Despite not being active participants in the protest, numerous onlookers or bystanders such as Yan and his acquaintances took out their mobile phones to take photos and film videos of the protest before they were instructed not to do so by the police. Photographs and videos were uploaded on Weibo on a minute-by-minute basis, promoting a lively broadcast of the protest.

‘Somebody is giving a speech…’ (at 13:12)

‘More and more people are coming, so are more and more police …’ (at 15:44)

‘This woman travelled a long distance, wanting to give this board [on which read: love Southern Weekly. Protect Southern Weekly. We support Southern Weekly by our conscience] to the press, but the security people did not let her in. So she could only hold the board here. All the people in the scene were reading the words together again and again.’ (at 19:51)

From the online images, people saw protesters giving speeches, holding banner signs with strong democratic words on them, and singing songs. Information on Weibo about the protest strengthened the online voice, which then mobilised more people to participate or standby in the protest.

Nevertheless, how may I explain protesters’ decision to participate while self-protection was preferable for most people? Obviously, the people who took radical action in the protest outside Southern Media offices were not from a single united and organised group. To understand their motivation and justification for action, my investigation focuses on individuals’ experiences, following a loosely and non-typological grouping: the loyal audiences of Southern Media, the activists, and the others who protested for various personal appeals.
5.2.2. ‘We come to mourn the death of our beloved paper’

Xiang’s photos of her wearing a mouth mask with three characters ‘Bi Yan Tao’ (‘speaking is prohibited’) on it were circulated widely on Weibo and overseas media, making her one of the best-known protesters in the Southern Weekly Incident. Xiang was in her 30s. It was the first time that Xiang participated in a protest. The decision of ‘doing something’ outside the office buildings of the press was firmly made on the night of 6 January, after Xiang witnessed the seizure of Southern Weekly’s Weibo account. As Xiang explained, she felt insulted.

‘Before the Southern Weekly Weibo account was seized by the authorities, I already felt the censoring and the modification of the New Year Edition was excessive. It went too far. But it was the seizure of the Southern Weekly account, the message that was posted there by those above that really disgusted me. I felt insulted. It was an insult to both the emotions and intelligence of citizens.’

With anger, Xiang said on her Weibo account that she was going to present flowers outside Southern Media office buildings the next day. Her post was quickly reposted, but deleted shortly after. The next morning Xiang appeared outside Southern Media with a mask labelled ‘Bi Yan Tao’ on her mouth and bunches of yellow chrysanthemums in her arms.

Xiang had been a loyal reader of Southern Weekly for many years and gradually felt disappointed by the lack of significant reports being published in the newspaper in recent years. She laid the blame on the censoring system. As she put it, ‘the newspaper had been dying, and this time it was sentenced to the complete death’. For her, presenting the yellow chrysanthemums was an action of mourning the death of both her beloved newspaper and press freedom in China. Xiang used to work as a web editor in an online current affairs forum, where she was required to read citizens’ posts on the forum, and delete ‘sensitive and inappropriate’ content. In the Taishi Village case in 2005, Xiang felt frustrated when she was conducting post deletion. ‘I deleted them, crying, knowing that otherwise the people who posted them would be in danger. It is so clear that there is no press freedom in China at all.’ Feeling frustrated by what she had to do as a web editor, Xiang resigned from her job after two years working on the forum.

19 The Chinese word for condom is ‘Bi Yun Tao’. Xiang’s writing ‘Bi Yan Tao’ replaced ‘Yun’ (pregnancy) with ‘Yan’ (speaking), thus spoofing the authorities’ censoring of publication and speaking. ‘Bi Yan Tao’ literally referred to abolition of speaking freedom.

20 The Taishi Village case took place in a rural village in South China in September 2005. During the case, Taishi villagers struggled to impeach their village officials for corruption. Guo Feixiong, a human rights lawyer who was also arrested at the end of 2013 for protesting outside Southern Media offices, provided villagers with legal assistance and initiated a media campaign, working with an assortment of lawyers, journalists, and scholars. The case was regarded as one of the earliest incidents that ushered in the rights movement in China.
Xiang said her decision to go to present flowers was made ‘simply’ and ‘without a lot of consideration and concern’. Having observed the 2011 Chinese pro-democracy protests\(^{21}\), Xiang was confident that her action would be too sudden for the police to react to it ‘as the police would need to wait for the instruction from the above to arrest people’. As she recalled,

‘I somewhat underestimated the influence of the incident. I did not expect to see so many citizens there. I thought that I merely went to present some flowers. It is a simple motivation of mourning the newspaper without considering the potential fallout.’

To her surprise, Xiang was faced with many overseas media from Hong Kong and the West, and soon she received vast amounts of compliments from the public for her behaviour. Thousands of people whom she did not know followed her on Weibo and expressed their appreciation for her action. She then became increasingly active online to interact with more citizens in the discussion of the *Southern Weekly* Incident. As she explained, ‘there is an imbalance between how little I had done and how much applause I had received. I felt the responsibility to do more.’ She was clearly likable. People commented that she gave others an impression of the ‘girl next door’ in her quirky conversations.

Xiang was creative and her form of action was artful. Her distinctive mouth mask, her initiation of presenting flowers, and the nifty language she used on Weibo posts all shaped her kind persona that effectively mobilised other people to follow her in action or comments. She was in some ways strategic in initiating the mobilisation of people’s participation after she became a popular public figure. On the night of 7 January and the following two days, adopting an entertaining tone, she fuelled online citizens’ discussion of a man who made a speech outside Southern Media offices. She asked people to ‘look at this man who is ‘good-looking’ and ‘with fashionable ‘Min Guo’ style dressing’ (‘Min Guo’ refers to the Republic of China (1912-1949). The wearing of Republic of China student uniforms is a new fashion among Chinese young people today). As she emphasised to me, ‘social movement always needs stars.’ She intended to add some entertaining and interesting elements to the case in order to attract the attention of ‘people who did not care that much about the serious issue of the case itself’. The man, Wei, was one of the stars Xiang was committed to promoting.

Wei was 31 years old, homosexual, an NGO worker who had long been committed to promoting LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) rights. Employed by a Hong Kong NGO, Wei was responsible for establishing the Guangzhou LGBT centre in 2009. The centre organises social activities across a number of cities across China, promoting equal rights and raising awareness of health services for LGBT groups. He had since then become the manager of the Guangzhou centre.

\(^{21}\) The 2011 Chinese pro-democracy protests refer to public assemblies in over a dozen cities in China starting on 20 February 2011, inspired by and named after the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia.
Wei first knew about the *Southern Weekly* Incident from an email sent from Hong Kong on his NGO mailing-list. Two days after reading the email, he was browsing Weibo pages when he saw the discussion of citizens about presenting flowers outside Southern Media. He immediately decided to join the action. With the intention of making it a day of mourning, he deliberately put on a plain black suit and matched it with a dark blue scarf. The look was solemn, and the ‘Min Guo’ style in some way made him popular among many young people online after the photos of him making a speech outside Southern Media were widely circulated.

Wei arrived outside Southern Media at around lunchtime and found a great number of people already there protesting. He had experienced street protests in Hong Kong before, but seeing such big crowds protesting in mainland China was rare and to a great extent made him excited. When he was walking towards the crowds, he remembered witnessing a speech outside Peking University when he was a teenager. He tried to stay calm, observing the order of the scene, judging how the police on the scene were reacting to citizens’ behaviour.

‘Based on my experience working on NGO activities, my judgement at that time was that the police outside Southern Media were instructed to maintain order, not to break up the crowds. It was not too dangerous. I saw many people presenting flowers, quietly, orderly. I thought this was too quiet. Somebody has got to say something. The memory of the man making a speech outside Peking University stayed in my mind, and at some point I stood up on the edge of the flower-bed outside the press and started speaking to the crowds.’

Wei grew up in Xi’an, a northern city in China. He studied media at university and undertook an internship at a local TV station, where he felt disappointed and critical about the commercial restriction of media production. He then worked for an NGO where he found his great passion. In 2008 he moved to Guangzhou to continue his NGO career. In Guangzhou, he found a completely different media culture, which he described as ‘the air of freedom’. He especially adored the publications from Southern Media, as ‘the editorials, and comments, and observation of Southern Media are so brave that publishing them in the north is impossible’. He was extremely impressed by the magazine *Southern People Weekly* (officially affiliated to *Southern Weekly*) for having made the topic of LGBT rights its cover story on a number of occasions.

Now he was at the gate of Southern Media which he regarded as the source of the fresh air in the south, facing the crowds who came to support the organisation. As a video of the protest reveals, Wei spoke to them in a booming, theatrical voice, waving his hands and sometimes clenching his fists:

‘I moved from the north of China to the south five years ago. Here, I feel the air is fresher, the sun is brighter. However, the *Southern Weekly* Incident made me concerned about the future here… If today we all remain silent,
where would be the hope for our future? If today we do not speak out, the voice of citizens, of the south, of the real China, all of which demand reforms would be repressed. This is absolutely not to be allowed. So, we need to speak out, about the demands of freedom, about the support for media. Tuo, step down!’

‘Tuo, step down!’ The crowds followed and repeated. More people made speeches after Wei. More people raised banners and signs with writing addressing the demands of press freedom, democracy, and constitutionalism. Some people started singing. As Wei recalled, the atmosphere of the scene was warming up, and was mobilised to a higher level after he spontaneously gave another speech in the afternoon.

‘All Chinese are looking forward to the reform of the country. Where will the reform of China start? It must be from the south. Where will the reform of the south start? It must from Guangzhou. We are looking at the south for possible press freedom. Media reform should start from here!’

The video and photographs of him were quickly circulated online, and published on overseas websites. Wei explained that his speeches were spontaneous and instigated by the atmosphere of the scene. He met Xiang at the site for the first time when she asked him if he was scared and gave him a flower.

Wei left the scene after making his second speech. Later in the evening he logged in his Weibo account and was shocked that many people online were looking for him.

‘Who is this handsome guy? He looks so ‘Min Guo’.’

‘We discovered that he is gay.’

That day, thousands of new followers added him on Weibo. Knowing some people were worrying about his safety, he reported online that he was safe. He also confessed his homosexual identity, which further attracted people’s attention and curiosity. Wei later found out that it was Xiang and a few others who endeavoured to promote his publicity. As he explained,

‘They said these days the principle of movements is ‘to be cool, to be fun’. They liked my dressing and speaking style because that made the event romantic and revolutionary. They made it become a symbol of me: ‘the blue scarf handsome man’. They were very good at creating suspense and releasing the answer bit by bit. In this way, more people were mobilised to talk and interact on Weibo.’

Feeling the increasing intensity of the online discussion about the case, and seeing photos of people still protesting and singing outside Southern Media until late into the night, Wei, however,
decided not to engage in further action for the sake of protecting his NGO, which had been under constant surveillance since it opened in 2009.

In fact, Wei’s NGO working experience, in particular organising LGBT social activities, had taught him to cautiously judge political circumstances. On the opening day of the Guangzhou LGBT centre, more than 30 police went to his office building winding up the business. Wei was blamed by the headquarters in Hong Kong for not being able to build up a good relation with the government for the Guangzhou centre to be able to run. He was frustrated, but after some tough negotiation he finally started running the centre. Since then, he had been able to maintain ‘a good and peculiar relationship with the government’. As he explained,

‘The national State Security officials know me very well. They know about my personalities from our previous dealings. They know that I will not go too far in activism. I have many contacts with foreign embassies, which they should also take into consideration and be careful not to make things too complicated for themselves.’

Despite feeling somewhat protected by his network, Wei restricted himself from further participation in order to protect his employment, as ‘consequences of further actions were in essence so unpredictable’.

Hui, in comparison with Wei’s fearless style of presenting himself at the site, protested without exposing his true identity, but similarly played an outstanding character. He was hidden behind a V for Vendetta mask, holding a board which read ‘1.3 billion Chinese have the right to speak; we want democracy and constitutionalism’. His mask stood out from the crowds, and for four days it attracted passers-by to stop and stare, even just for curiosity. For Hui, the V for Vendetta mask was a tool that first, conveyed the messages of confrontation, and second, protected him from exposing his real identity. Noticing the effectiveness of the mask for getting the attention of the public, Hui later wrapped himself in newspaper from head to foot and sat on the floor to read a newspaper. He intended to, through this art performance, ‘let more people know that the media has been kidnapped’. A popular news website posted the photo of ‘the injured man bound up by newspaper’ on Weibo, with the text: ‘At the weekend, media employees were injured in the South’, alluding to the Southern Weekly (Weekend in the Chinese name) Incident.

It was the first time that Hui participated in a street protest. Hui was in his 30s, a real estate businessman and a father of three children. He claimed that he did not care much about social affairs until 2007 when he went to court to challenge a tenant renting one of his properties. He won his case but the Executive Board would not help with the execution of the penalty. His friends who worked in the court told him that there was no solution but to seek help from the media to expose the case. He was then frustrated to find that the media, not having the freedom to do the report, could not help him either. After the case, he was ruined. The judicial injustice, the
incompetence of public institutions, and the helplessness of the media made him realise that ‘the social system as a whole was not working’.

Yet, it was not until 2012 that Hui became more actively engaged in discussing social affairs online. In 2012, his third child was born in Hong Kong with a genetic illness. He felt grateful that his daughter received efficient and careful treatments without needing him to use personal connections to pull the strings in hospitals. As he said, ‘I felt that the medical system in Hong Kong and the practitioners working within it treated my daughter as a life that needed to be respected and taken care of. What they did was so impressive compared to the medical treatment my other two children received in mainland China when they were ill. You had to seek connections all the time in a hospital in mainland China.’ Travelling over the border between Hong Kong and mainland China when his daughter was born, Hui was also struck by the Hong Kong news reports of Chen Guangcheng, a Chinese civil rights activist and a human rights lawyer, who escaped house arrest and fled to the US Embassy in Beijing. As Hui put it,

‘You saw the rolling news of Chen broadcast on Hong Kong media almost around the clock during those few days. But once you crossed the border to Shenzhen [the border between Hong Kong and mainland China], you could not hear even a tiny voice about this news story. You suddenly realised how ridiculous it is to live in a place where information is strictly controlled and you miss so much of what is actually happening.’

Despite being actively engaged in online discussion about social affairs since 2012, it was the Southern Weekly Incident that finally mobilised Hui to take on street action. The feeling of being personally connected with Southern Media played a part in driving him to shift from online discussion to offline action. He was a loyal reader of publications of Southern Media and for many years he had regarded the reports of Southern Media to be ‘the most enlightened and liberal writing in China’. The night the Weibo account of Southern Weekly was seized, his emotion was greatly mobilised. For the whole night he had been refreshing Weibo pages looking at updated information about Southern Weekly. As he explained,

‘I saw so many media employees struggling. At the end the newspaper still had to give up the official Weibo account. Although media people were not able to say much, we felt the despair between their simple words. I felt so moved by the effort they had made and such urgency that I should stand up for them. It is time for me to step forward.’

Hui described his action as being somewhat ‘irrational’. As he put it,
‘I did not see it as a political event, and did not think I was doing something dangerous, nor did I expect to find that many undercover police officers were actually there.’

Kai became a close friend of Hui after the Southern Weekly Incident. In a photo of the Southern Weekly protest, the V for Vendetta masked man was standing side-by-side with a man lifting a placard which read ‘I am a citizen who should have the freedom to speak. I support Southern Weekly. News reports should be set free.’ This was Kai. The two men did not know each other at that time. As shown on a video recorded by some citizens, Kai, without any costume to conceal his identity, was making strong speeches, fearless and bitter. He shouted to the crowds,

‘As citizens we don’t dare speak out. The media help us get the voice out. Now the newspaper is suppressed. How can we still be silent?

People on the site responded strongly to his speeches. As Kai recalled, some people brought him water and bread, and escorted him for protection when he went to toilet.

It was also the first time that Kai participated in a street protest. Like Hui, Kai spent the previous night refreshing Weibo pages for updated information. With little sleep that night, he made the placard and took the metro to Southern Media in the early morning. At the same time he contacted Ling on QQ, with whom Kai had been sharing opinions on public affairs for a few years but never met. Ling was an online blog writer and activist who had been promoting the public disclosure of the assets of government officials. Ling and Kai agreed to meet at Southern Media. As Kai recalled, Ling was passionate and bold. On the train to Southern Media, Kai noticed that the surrounding passengers were curious about the board he was holding and he then made a speech. After he expressed on the train the support for Southern Weekly, he heard a sudden voice came from a stranger: ‘Support Southern Weekly!’ Kai later found out that the person who shouted was Ling and it was their first offline meeting.

Kai had successively worked in music, advertising, the lumber industry, and animal husbandry. At various points at work he was frustrated by what he believed to be unjust management and abuse of power of the local authorities. An example was that in 2009, when he was running the lumber business in Yunnan province, he was not able to get a certificate for his business after refusing to give some benefits to the local authorities. His business went bankrupt. Kai described himself as being reborn after getting online in late 1990s. As he revealed, ‘The Internet opened a complete new world to me which was very different from the one I knew. The information I found there constantly shocked me and changed my whole view of the country where I had been living for my life’. For many years, Kai had actively been involved in discussing public affairs on online bulletin boards, online forums, and now Weibo. In the Southern Weekly Incident, he decided to make the shift from online to offline. As he explained, protesting in this incident was ‘a chemical reaction, an eruption of emotion that had been accumulating over many years’. More precisely, he recalled,
‘It was the longing for freedom, the pursuit of justice, and the anger with the evil power together that finally drove me to make the shift….I did not have clear goal when I went there. I simply wanted to have my voice there and hoped that more and more people would realise the evilness of the current regime and do something together to change it. Deep down in my heart I was longing for some resonance from other people.’

Unlike Xiang, Wei, and Hui, who did not anticipate high risks from the action, Kai perceived the Southern Weekly Incident as ‘a serious political case’ and anticipated high risks associated with his action. As he described,

‘I was 9 years old when the 1989 Tiananmen Student movement took place. I remember seeing the protesting scenes from our black-and-white TV set, hearing the narrative calling it ‘student riots’. Many years later from the Internet I learned the different story of the truth. I knew what the authorities might do to control confrontational people and direct publicity. I was very aware of high risks. I wanted to be honest, admitting that the protest I was going to was a political and ideological struggle, rather than trying to de-politicise the case to protect myself. When I set off in the morning I told my wife that if I was not able to come back, she should let our son (who was then 7 months old) know what his dad had done.’

Kai protested for two days and on the third day he was blocked from leaving his home by some of his friends who had been pressured by the local police.

Xiang, Wei, Hui, and Kai were all first-time protesters in the Southern Weekly Incident. In many respects they may be representative of the majority of the street protesters in the Southern Weekly Incident. Some were reported to have travelled a few hours from other provinces to Southern Media (Yu, 2013). Some features of this group of people can be summarised. Generally, these are the people who protested the suffering of the newspaper, or in a broader sense, the freedom of press and speech, who were relatively young and brave, and did not have much experience of street protests before the incident, and who were influenced by a global culture that brought them democratic ideas to demand and defend human rights. They took on action without undertaking serious assessment of the potential dangers they faced. To put it more precisely, they were to some extent pre-occupied by their passion for demanding increased human rights and citizenship and resisted being manipulated by concerns about risks.

There are at least two distinct sub-groups here. Some, like Xiang, Wei, and Hui, resisted over-considering risks by convincing themselves that they would be safe as they were simply asking for rights that they deserved as Chinese citizens and their action did not violate laws so arresting them would be unlawful. This does not mean that they were not aware of any risk. The self-conviction was not made with absolute certainty. However, the lack of experience of protests
meant predicting the possible dangers of taking action was based merely on imagination. Therefore, the passion for taking on democratic action, inside these young and angry people, overtook their consideration of the risks which they may have disregarded as simple paranoia. Some other people, like Kai, were fully prepared to sacrifice themselves thus refusing to be made paranoid by the risks. To put it another way, they were immune to the fears. This is more typical of the activist groups that I will analyse in the next section.

A characteristic of the action of this group of people is that they were creative, and saw publicity as one of the main goals of their action. Although democratic and political appeals were the ultimate goals, they had the consensus that strengthening the publicity of the case, informing people of the incident, and mobilising more people should be their direct and realistic target of action at the current stage. To achieve effective publicity, they emphasise using artful forms of action to mobilise people. For example, Xiang brought aesthetic perception to both the street action and online communication. This can be seen from her distinctive mouth mask, her initiation of presenting flowers outside South Press, and her emphasis of the importance of ‘stars’ in social movements. After more people followed her Weibo account, she filled her Weibo feed not only with information about social affairs, but also photos of her having a meal, dressing up, and having fun in her daily activities. She communicated with people online in quirky language, like a ‘girl next door’. As she perceived, using Weibo accounts for mobilising people requires the accounts to be ‘alive’ and ‘attractive’. Specifically as she explained, online accounts should be humanised by real life activities and emotion, and it is better if they are endowed with aesthetic feelings and constant suspense that can maintain their attraction. Wei’s ‘Min Guo’ style dressing and speaking, Hui’s V for Vendetta mask and his art performance of ‘the newspaper man’, citizens’ banners and boards containing inspiring words, the group singing and so forth, all showed the creativity of the people and their determined pursuit of publicity.

It certainly should be acknowledged that each individual coming to the protest had rich life experience to tell, which underpinned their participation. Xiang, Wei, Hui, and Kai’s experiences both in their professional and personal lives, generated emotions and embodiment during the protest. Their emotions and embodiment will be analysed together with other online and offline actors’ action in Chapter 6.

It is not hard to understand that protesting in the Southern Weekly Incident for some citizens meant a significant step forward in their public and political participation. Arguably, this progression has since brought about dramatic change to some people’s life. Let me briefly tell other parts of Xiang, Hui, and Kai’s stories of their experiences after the Southern Weekly Incident.

Xiang became actively engaged in other protests after the Southern Weekly Incident, joining other dissidents in democratic social events in the remainder of 2013. In February 2013, Xiang managed to bring a few activists together to urge local police to release a Guangzhou dissident named Li Xiaoling, who went to Beijing to petition for the rights of rural villagers and was escorted back to Guangzhou by the Guangzhou officers in Beijing, and then detained in a hotel. In the
same month, Xiang participated in the protest against North Korea’s conduct of an underground nuclear test. There reportedly were 9 people being arrested for participating in this event. Xiang was also active in a number of protests demanding that government officials publicly disclose their assets. The photographs of her protesting and the Weibo messages that she posted during particular social events were published in Hong Kong and other overseas media. However, her increasing activeness in public events quickly raised the sensitivity of her profile. Her Weibo account was blocked and shut down many times. Since the end of 2013, she and her family had received threats from authorities, the details of which Xiang did not wish to disclose.

Hui, like Xiang, became increasingly active in other protests after the Southern Weekly Incident. As Hui explained, the Southern Weekly Incident was for him a tipping point when he realised the passion deep inside him for taking offline action, and from this point he was networked with other protesters he met in the Southern Weekly Incident and stepped into an activist community whose members were always prepared for street protests (I will discuss the activist community in the next section). As he said,

‘With the people I met in the Southern Weekly protest, I did not deliberately stay in touch. But later in other events, I always found some familiar faces whom I met in the Southern Weekly protest. At some point we became regular contacts. And we have been together joining the dinner gathering events (by which Hui referred to the events called ‘citizen banquets’ or ‘Tong Cheng Fan Zui’ [fan – food, zui – drunk], meaning ‘Same-city dinner gathering’, an ongoing event organised by some citizens for discussing social issues over the meals, and is homonymous with ‘committing a crime in the city’ in Chinese23) where we discuss social issues. Now we have established our WeChat groups in which we interact and plan action together. My life circle has been expanded. My contact circle is not limited to Guangzhou anymore. When activists in other cities visit Guangzhou, we meet up, and I also meet up with them in their cities.’

Towards the end of 2013, Hui also became increasingly sensitive to the authorities. By June 2014, Hui had registered 37 Weibo accounts successively, creating a new one each time a previous one was shut down. Being prohibited to register new accounts, Hui later found a way to register new accounts through Weibo overseas service by using a proxy service to fake his IP address. Later in June 2014, Hui was detained in a hotel under 24 hours surveillance for 15 days, stopping him joining the 25th anniversary commemoration of the June 4th student protest. In July 2014, he was prohibited from crossing the border into Hong Kong.

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23 The dinner gathering event is further explained later.
Kai, who believed that many Chinese people needed ‘to be woken up’, also stepped into the activist community after the Southern Weekly Incident, actively participating in other street protests. As he saw it,

‘There are of course fake sleepers who have vested interests and who care more about their stable job and income and pretend to not know the dark realities, and others are sleepers who need to be woken up. Some have already been woken up by the pain, like me. But there are still many sleepers who need to be woken up. We need to bring some enlightenment to them and let them see the evilness of the power.’

In June 2014, he was arrested for participating in the 25th anniversary commemoration of the June 4th student protest. In July 2014, together with Hui and a few others, Kai was prohibited from going across the border to Hong Kong. He protested this restriction outside the US embassy in Guangzhou in September, and was arrested again.

The latent effects that are emphasised by Melucci (1996a) was certainly demonstrated by the formation of latent networks between people like Xiang, Hui, and Kai. As Hui and Kai both explained, acting in the Southern Weekly Incident made them recognise the passion deep inside them to take on street actions. Stepping into the activist community, they had since been maintaining a high level of attendance in discussing social issues and promoting democratic action on the street, in particular confronting protests that defend human rights against the authorities.

However, it is understandable that transformation to an activist does not happen easily to everyone who was mobilised in the Southern Weekly Incident, as human beings’ drive to action is complex and the risk of being an activist is obviously high. For those who made the shift, the change of their identity as activists does not simply mean going to more protests, but means a total change of what they do and how they do it in democratic actions, and more importantly, implies higher tension between these individuals and the authorities. This point may become clearer after the action of activists is explored in the next section.

5.2.3. ‘Come on! It’s a good issue to use’

A video uploaded online by a citizen shows the following conversation outside Southern Media office buildings:

‘… At the present, Guangzhou is where civil society is most developed in China. The development of civil society is important for all of us. The power of civil society should be on top of Xi Jinping’s government.’ Guo Feixiong spoke to the people surrounding him.
'What is democracy? We talk about democracy so much but actually many people don’t know what exactly it is.’ A voice came from the crowd.

‘You are joking. These days people are all well-educated. Who would not know about democracy? …. It is about the power of the citizens…. Why should we support *Southern Weekly* today? Because the newspaper has been excellent for decades for being the mouthpiece and the eyes of the people. Now it is suffering from political repression. We should support it, standing side-by-side with it.’ Guo responded.

Compared to Wei and Kai, who gave exciting and inspiring speeches, Guo adopted the tone of a lecturer, an opinion leader, directing the discussion at the site. The 47-year-old man was intellectual-like, wearing black-framed glasses and speaking in a gentle voice. He appeared to be calm and sophisticated in conversations. Nevertheless, Guo was detained in August 2013 (seven months after the *Southern Weekly* Incident) and indicted on June 2014, in connection with his alleged role in planning and organising the *Southern Weekly* protest and a few other events. He was officially indicted for ‘gathering crowds to disrupt order in public places’, together with the other two activists who also participated in the *Southern Weekly* protest. In November 2015, Guo was sentenced to six years in prison (Phillips, 2015; Reuters, 2015). The indictment of Guo and the other two activists has so far been the only public charge in connection with participation in the *Southern Weekly* protest (although there were reportedly many hidden and unidentifiable charges and short-term detentions in relation to this case). What made Guo different from Xiang, Wei, Hui, Kai, and other protesters who were loyal readers of Southern Media?

Guo was one of the activists, who participated in the *Southern Weekly* Incident. For clarity, the activists involved in the *Southern Weekly* protest, whose experiences and personal stories I tell in this section, were the people who had participated in other previous protesting events, or at least involved in the same networks. They often asserted in my interviews that they belonged to ‘the democratic circle’, ‘rights defence circle’, ‘revolution circle’, or ‘rebel groups’. It is fair to say that in a broad sense they belonged to the activist community in the region of South China.

Given that Chinese activists pursue civil mobilisation in China as a goal, activists becoming participants in the protest in the *Southern Weekly* Incident was not a surprise. Although they did

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24 Guo Feixiong is the pen name of Yang Maodong. Guo’s indictments in June 2014 include planning and organising the *Southern Weekly* protest, planning to hold signs in eight cities in the spring of 2013 calling for officials to disclose assets, and promoting China to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (HRIC, 2014). I will introduce Guo’s previous experience in the later text in this chapter.

25 This charge is often used against protesters in China and it carries a maximum prison sentence of five years.

26 As introduced by a few prominent figures in the activist community, the activist community in China was more an interpersonal network based on the common political recognition among people than a formal organisation in the institutional sense. In a broader sense, it was consisted by like-minded dissidents who either regularly met to discuss social issues or only networked through social media but never met in person. Many of them had participated in dissident action or provided help to people in dissident action, while some of them had only contributed in discussion. In particular regions, the activist communities centred on a few key people, and the regional coalitions were also based on the ideological recognition.
not make up a large proportion of the protest population in the *Southern Weekly* Incident (roughly 30 people out of the total number of 300 on 7 January and a smaller number on the next two days, according to SCMP, 2013), they contributed to the protest not only through their determined action at the site, but also through the effective mobilisation of citizens participating in the action. Now let me review activists’ engagement in the Incident to examine the mechanisms of their action, and to understand the tension between activists and the Party authorities.

Activists’ action in the *Southern Weekly* Incident began earlier than Xiang and other citizens’ activities of laying flowers. Shen, a teacher and writer, was the first person to hold up a sign outside Southern Media offices to protest on 5 January. He was a friend of many activists. Despite in many previous cases ‘he preferred not to join street action’, as his activists friends recalled, he surprisingly became the first person to take street action in the *Southern Weekly* Incident. As he told a Hong Kong magazine (Yibao, 2013),

‘The propaganda department is too mean. This time they really have challenged my tolerance of the Communist Party. This is the severe interference of the freedom of speech. I don’t understand why other people don’t go to the street to protest. I think I will be the first one and hope to mobilise others.’

Outside the gate of Southern Media office buildings, he lifted a sign which read ‘Go! *Southern Weekly*; Step down! Tuo.’ As he told the magazine, the police asked him to leave, and he negotiated with the police for 10 more minutes, and at the end he held up the sign for half an hour (Yibao, 2013). The photos of Shen protesting outside Southern Media were posted on Weibo and Twitter (blocked in China), but those on Weibo were quickly censored.

Shen’s friend Yedu, an active member in the activist circle, saw Shen’s photos on Twitter. Despite the fact that Twitter is blocked in China, Yedu had adopted Twitter as a relatively safe platform for discussing democratic issues and used a proxy service to access it on a daily basis. As Yedu put it, ‘I think Shen’s behaviour outside Southern Media was very meaningful and it may be something that can further ferment.’ In the evening of the same day, Yedu invited Shen to a meal, which was also an occasion to meet a film director from Beijing. More than 10 activists including Guo Feixiong joined the meal. During the meal, Shen talked about his activity of protesting outside Southern Media on the day. Many people in the group were inspired by Shen’s action and agreed that the *Southern Weekly* Incident was a good opportunity to mobilise ‘an event of civil expressions’. As Yedu put it,

‘We knew about the *Southern Weekly* Incident before Shen went to protest. But we didn’t think about making collective action for the newspaper. There is kind of a distance between the party-run newspaper and us. I did not feel it necessary to take action until Shen took action there. Shen’s action gave us
inspiration that we should use the case as a stage for civil expression, although we may not actually care about the newspaper.’

After the meal, some of the people in the group moved to a coffee shop to continue discussing how to make the Southern Weekly Incident ‘really become a case of expressing citizens’ appeals’. They agreed that street collective action was necessary, as ‘neither individual protest nor online discussion was powerful and influential enough’. They made the plan for the street protest in the next two days, including protesting outside Southern Media office buildings on 6 January and outside Guangdong provincial government office buildings on 7 January. According to the arrangement they made, some of them would be responsible for holding up signs, some monitoring the updated information online, and others including Yedu would be taking photos and circulating the photos on Twitter and Weibo.

The protest on 6 January proceeded as planned. As expected, Yedu and other activists’ posts on Twitter and Weibo showing their action outside Southern Media attracted their followers to go to the protest site. The protest of that day ended with the police taking away Yuan, who lifted a sign, asking to ‘have a talk’. The police confiscated the protesting sign Yuan held, and set him free not long after. However, Yuan soon found himself followed on the way back, and warned Yedu to be careful via a phone call. Given the plan of continuing protesting the next day, Yedu spent the night of 6 January in a spa to avoid being found by the police. It was that night when the official Weibo account of Southern Weekly was aggressively seized and citizens online were greatly mobilised. As Yedu described,

‘I saw people online discussing going to Southern Media to present flowers the next day. Knowing that many people will go to the press [Southern Media], on the morning of 7 January [the date that was originally scheduled for protesting outside the provincial government office buildings] we decided to locate our protest outside Southern Media again, using the content that we already decided on 5 January.’

It was the day when the full scale of Southern Weekly protest actually started, and the day when street activists and citizens who were mobilised in online discussion met and merged together. As Yedu recalled,

‘I knew some people were going but still felt surprised to see so many people outside the press. It was certainly the outcome of the online fermentation of the case itself. It was also the result of the composition of various forces. Our action the day before and Shen’s action earlier may only contribute a little to these joint forces.’

Seeing the lively atmosphere of the scene, Yedu decided to live broadcast the protest on Weibo. He posted on his Weibo account more than 20 photos of the event and within three hours his
Weibo account gained more than 20,000 new followers. Yedu was soon found by the police who noticed his intensive posting of protest photos and he was then taken home by the police for a few days’ house arrest.

Another activist Ye Yin also participated in the protest, feeling ‘the need to show the minimal level of resistance in such dark ages’. On 5 January, Ye Yin took photos of Shen holding a protesting sign and posted the photos on Weibo and Twitter. On 8 January, Ye Yin himself also held signs to join the protest outside Southern Media. As Ye Yin recalled,

‘Before I went on 8 January, I planned to take some photos and possibly hold signs. While I was there, seeing so many people making speeches in the scene, I felt impulsive at some point. But I saw so many police and state security staff there who already knew me and watched me, then I strictly limited myself from making a speech.’

Ye Yin also uploaded photos of the protest outside Southern Media which were quickly reposted thousands of times. His posts, despite not explicitly calling for other people’s participation in the protest, generated his Weibo followers’ participation in the protest. As he explained, ‘The GPS of the phone also showed my location. I did not ask anybody to go with me. But I knew that as long as my friends knew I was there, they would also go.’ On 9 January, Ye Yin was taken away by the police. He was then ‘forced to travel’\(^\text{27}\) for five days.

Activists seemed to be confident about the effectiveness of exposing their action on Weibo to mobilise other activists’ action. Obviously, the network between them needed to be examined in order to understand the mobilisation. To examine the network between activists, my investigation needs to go beyond the frame of the Southern Weekly Incident. Ultimately, what made the activists in the Southern Weekly Incident distinctive was their identity in the activist community, the activist network that had been able to mobilise multiple street actions. Let me start by reviewing Guo Feixiong and a few prominent activists’ experience and their role in the activist community.

Guo Feixiong was well-known for his long history of social and political activism. He was also a writer and legal consultant based in Southern Metropolis Daily. He was well-known for his connection with the 2005 Taishi village case in which he helped residents of Taishi village organise themselves against a local Communist Party director who illegally sold some land in the village for personal benefits. After the Taishi village case, Guo was sentenced to five years in prison, with the charge of ‘running an illegal business’, which was said by other activists to be ‘stemming from his publication of a book about a political scandal’ (RFA, 2006; Phillips, 2015).

\(^{27}\) Chinese dissidents have coined the phrase ‘being travelled’ or ‘being forced to travel’ to refer to a measure usually taken by the authorities against dissidents. Dissidents are obliged to leave town and travel to a removed place, on an ‘all-expenses-paid holiday’ which is completed with police escorts (The Guardian, 2014).
He had reportedly faced police harassment and numerous beatings in prison (RFA, 2006). After his release in 2011, Guo remained active in many cases of defending human rights and citizenship. In 2012, he participated in a series of events defending human rights, such as the Wukan village elections and investigations into the suspicious death of rights defender Li Wangyang. Since 2013, Guo had been actively calling for officials to disclose their assets, which was part of the Southern Street Movement, a movement that involved ongoing actions of petitioners holding banners or signs to protest against injustice or forced demolitions in main Southern cities such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen (China Change, 2013).

Guo was viewed by other dissidents as ‘a man of action’ and ‘very determined’ in exercising the rights ‘under constitution – freedom of speech, freedom of expression’ (CDT, 2014a). He had become an influential figure in the activist community in China’s southern cities (Phillips, 2015). Many activists in the Southern Weekly protest believed that the authorities had been seeking opportunities to frame Guo’s charge and for the two years prior to the Southern Weekly Incident, had been waiting for a proper accusation to arrest him. As they understood it, Guo’s participation in the Southern Weekly protest was merely an opportunity used by the authorities for accusation. As reviewed by another human rights lawyer Sui Muqing, who had been working with activists for three years and also acted as Guo’s lawyer in 2013, what made Guo more sensitive than other activists was Guo’s prominent role in leading the Southern Street Movement, and in initiating and expanding the activist community.

The Southern Street Movement, in which Guo’s leading part was highly exposed, seemed to play an important role in engineering the development of the activist network in South China. Different from other rights defence demonstrations which resorted to rightful resistance, ongoing street petitions through protests in the Southern Street Movement were a form of direct, conscious political action, openly calling for democratic freedoms. The Southern Street Movement was initiated in August 2011 in Guangzhou. As Wang Aizhong, one of its initiators introduced in an interview (China Change, 2013),

‘We felt that we had only been staying online to voice our opinions and expressed our concerns on various issues, and the actual impact of online expression had been very small. Later, several people in Guangzhou ...

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28 Wukan protests were an anti-corruption case that took place in a Southern Chinese village of Wukan. It began in September 2011 after officials sold land to real estate developers without compensating the villagers. The case was escalated in December 2011 and involved severe confrontation events including the expulsion of officials by villagers and the siege of the town by police. The governor of Guangdong later acquiesced to a village election of the governors in the village.

29 Li Wangyang was a Chinese dissident and a participant in the 1989 Tiananmen protest. He was imprisoned for 21 years for joining the protest. In June 2012, one year after his release from prison, and a few days after a television interview in which he continued to call for vindication of the Tiananmen protest, Li was found hanged in a hospital room. The city authorities initially claimed it as a case of suicide, but after the autopsy they revised it as an accidental death (Liu, 2012).

30 As mentioned in Chapter 4, Sui has been held by police since July 2015 after being accused of inciting subversion of state power.
worked on the idea of ‘Moving from the Internet to the Public Square.’ We initiated a monthly gathering at the Huanghuagang Memorial Park … where we met on the last Sunday of each month at two o’clock in the afternoon. You could say that this was the start of the Southern Street Movement.’

According to Wang, despite repression, Southern Street Movement in Guangdong found room to develop before the Southern Weekly Incident. As Wang said,

‘When three or four people held up signs on the street, or in the park, the police would intervene but were by and large lenient. They seldom took the participants into custody, let alone criminally detained them. Even administrative detentions were used sparsely. At most the authorities would summon the participants “to drink tea”, or make a record of the event …’

Petitioners becoming part of the activist community significantly expanded the activist network in Guangdong. Guo’s role in this networking showed what Ye Yin highlighted as Guo’s ‘ability to transform many petitioners into determined rights defenders through networking them in various events’. Ye Yin revealed that rights defenders formed close connections with each other, and often efficiently took collective action when any of them encountered trouble. As suggested, many of those rights defenders participated in the Southern Weekly protest.

Ye Yin was most known for publicly supporting Chen Guangcheng in 2012. He was introduced by Guo to meet other activists in 2012, including Sui Muqing. Sui was in his 40s. He was a participant in the 1989 student movement when he was studying law at a university in Beijing. He was imprisoned for a few years for participating in the student movement. After being released, he became a lawyer working in his hometown, during which he was regularly visited by the local police. In 1998 he went to Guangzhou and changed his name in order to start a new life. He did not tell anyone about his involvement in the 1989 student movement until he started using Weibo and found that he was willing to share his story with some people on Weibo. In 2012 he met Guo, who encouraged him to handle human rights cases and become a human rights lawyer. Sui was introduced to many other people from various fields by Guo. Since then, Sui had joined the activist community, attending several events with other members together, including the Southern Weekly protest.

Sui was highly complimentary of Guo’s abilities to use the Internet for connecting activists and to integrate an online network with offline gathering activities. As Sui put it,

31 As Wang also commented in the interview with China Change (2013), the Southern Weekly Incident marked a point of authoritarian repression of street action being significantly tightened. As he put it, ‘Since the Southern Weekend [Southern Weekly] Incident … criminal detention has been directly applied to people who have participated in street demonstrations’. It has been reported that many of the participants of the Southern Street Movement were successively arrested or detained after the Southern Weekly Incident, on various charges.
Guo was sent to prison for 5 years until September 2011 when he was released. Guo had activist connections before he went to prison, but by the time he was released he was disconnected with the society. He quickly learned to use the Internet and was able to connect with his previous associates to develop a community, and also able to network these people together in offline gatherings. He also identified new people in different fields and developed them as members’.

Regarding his friendship with Ye Yin, Sui recalled, Ye Yin and him had arguments online around some issues before they met in person. After they were introduced by Guo, they became friends, and they shared more after the Southern Weekly protest in which both were participants. Sui Commented,

‘You may know about people online from what they say about a specific issue, but only after you meet offline do you really know them and a strong connection may be built. Guo was very good at organising this’.

Yedu, another active participant in the Southern Weekly protest, was also an influential figure in the activist community and a prominent activist of the Southern Street Movement. Yedu regarded himself as a seasoned dissident and activist in Guangzhou. Yedu was 19 years old when the 1989 student movement swept many cities all over China. He participated in the movement in Guangdong, joining the protests at the provincial government and other activities. Yedu accused Deng Xiaoping, who was then the paramount leader of China\(^\text{32}\), of being responsible for using force against students in the movement. In February 1997 when Deng Xiaoping died, Yedu was working in a local propaganda department in a Southern city in China. He refused to stand up to observe a moment of silence for Deng’s death, and then was reprimanded, being sent to do menial work in a Party-run book store.

In 2000, a computer centre was established in the book store and Yedu, who was skilled in computing, was appointed to be the director. Being granted with convenient access to the Internet, Yedu and two other people in Beijing launched a discussion forum named ‘Democracy and Freedom’ which soon attracted hundreds of visitors daily to discuss various social issues. But less than three months after the Democracy and Freedom forum opened, authorities suddenly shut down the Web site which hosted the forum. Yedu and his colleagues managed to reopen the forum on another site, but since then the forum had been repeatedly shut down, blocked, hacked, or incapacitated by the authorities. Each time the site was closed, Yedu and his colleagues found other ways (e.g. found another company in another city, bought online space for personal Web pages, etc.) to reopen it. At some point, there were more than 30 people from different places in China working for the forum, and most of them never met each other. In November 2002, Yedu’s two co-founders of the forum in Beijing were arrested for running the forum, and Yedu was

\(^{32}\) Deng was the paramount leader of China from 1978 to 1992
suspended by the book store, with the accusation of ‘keeping extremely reactionary essays’ on his office computer.

In April 2003 Yedu was officially sacked by the book store and he went to Guangzhou where he worked as a part-time college lecturer and subsequently a HR administrator, and at the same time continued to run the forum. He lost his two jobs successively after intervention by the Ministry of State Security. With the forum becoming increasingly popular and the regulation of the Internet becoming increasingly tightened, Yedu found it more and more difficult to maintain the operation of the forum. By the time the forum completely stopped running in July 2006, it had a record of being shut down 49 times within 5 years.

When Yedu was running the Democracy and Freedom forum, he met Liu Xiaobo who is a human rights activist and was awarded the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize while being detained in prison (Liu is currently still incarcerated as a political prisoner). Back then, Liu was President of the Independent Chinese PEN Centre (ICPC) which is an organisation especially active in promoting freedom of speech, in particular providing writers under arrest with humanitarian help such as paying legal fees, applying for grants or awards in human rights. Liu invited Yedu to help run the website of ICPC. Yedu later became the Deputy Secretary General of ICPC and his connection with ICPC put him under constant and close surveillance by the Ministry of State Security. He had been arrested many times and experienced short-term detention and long-time imprisonment (in 2011 he was incarcerated for half a year), while remaining as an active member of the community.

It can be seen that members such as Guo, Ye Yin, Sui Muqing, Yedu, petitioners and rights defenders in the Southern Street Movement, and new members such as Hui and Kai who were introduced to the network after the Southern Weekly Incident, formed an expanding activist community in South China. They entered the network with previous personal experiences which they regarded as unjust and unfair. They regularly met in the ‘same-city dinner gathering’ events, which was an ongoing activity proposed by the New Citizens’ Movement (introduced in Chapter 3) at the end of 2011 and had become popular among activists in many cities. In the ‘same-city dinner gathering’ events, online citizens organised themselves to meet up for discussing social issues over a meal on the last Saturday of every month (Xiao, 2013; RFA, 2013). As Yedu introduced, the format of the dinner gatherings in Guangzhou, particularly the process of doing self-introductions, discussing a particular issue, and expressing appeals, had become relatively mature. As Hui, who stepped into the activist community after the Southern Weekly Incident described, when some activists agreed to take action together for a case, other activists may provide financial and legal aid, assisting to protect their action and enhance the publicness of their action. Hui explained that activist groups often organised themselves to take action at various

33 China’s police viewed political gatherings of citizens as being illegal, but people joining dinner gatherings emphasised that the police have no legitimate reason to prohibit citizens living in the same city from going to a restaurant to eat and drink together. At 2013, the dinner gatherings reportedly took place in more than 30 cities (Xiao, 2013; RFA, 2013). With the expansion of the event, participants in the dinner gatherings in main cities had been under increasing pressure. They had been questioned by police, and prominent figures were sometimes threatened or detained. This was introduced by some activists in my interviews.
times during a particular event, ‘the first group and then second group, trying to avoid our action being completely stopped’.

Participating in collective action together was one of the main activities of the activist community. As Yedu explained, compared to online action, the high risk of street action in some way tightened the connection between actors. As Yedu put it, in cases such as activists being detained together, they shared a strong emotional connection. The protest of the Southern Weekly Incident demonstrated the effectiveness of this network in facilitating mobilisation of street action. It was commonly shared among activists that the goal of participating in social events such as the Southern Weekly Incident was to widely promote civil expression and civil action.

It is most appropriate to understand activists’ action in the Southern Weekly Incident as aiming to promote civil action rather than specifically going against censorship or asking for press freedom. This point was demonstrated by the fact that many of these activists admitted that they did not perceive their action as a struggle for the newspaper. As Yedu explained,

‘We already knew that press freedom is impossible in China at this stage. So we only saw the Southern Weekly protest as merely an action for civil expression. To be more precise, it did not matter how the Southern Weekly Incident developed. The Southern Weekly Incident was only the background, the stage of our action. I am personally not interested in Southern Weekly… What we wanted in this case, as in many other cases, was to help citizens defeat the fear of joining street action. We wanted to let them know that civil expression is itself part of their rights. We hoped that after citizens join in more action and develop the habit of taking action, there will be a date for a large scale revolution’.

Yedu in some way separated activists’ street action in the Southern Weekly Incident from the publication incident of the newspaper itself. He further explained the way of using the incident for the purpose of activism.

‘From the beginning I did not expect the action to be a cooperation between the staff of Southern Media, citizens, and our democratic circle. The newspaper is after all operated within the Party-state system. I am familiar with many people inside the media circle and I know very clearly that those media people will not want to pay the price for challenging the system. We cannot expect their cooperation. So we can only develop the incident to be an occasion for civic participation and citizen expression. In other words, the newspaper provides a background, and we take action, and then we are separate from the newspaper’.
Ironically, while emphasising that the *Southern Weekly* protest was merely an opportunity for the government to arrest key activists such as Guo whom the government had been wanting to arrest for a long time, the activists in the *Southern Weekly* protest also admitted that the *Southern Weekly* Incident was merely a good opportunity for action. For both parties, the case itself was immaterial.

Nevertheless, activists in the *Southern Weekly* Incident did not necessarily agree with each other’s political views. It is safe to say that activists’ different political views of how to change the current political system, to some extent, determined the levels of intensity of their action in the *Southern Weekly* Incident. In a broad sense, many activists focused on promoting institutional reform within the government rather than undermining the party regime. For them, this was a feasible approach to demanding human rights in China. However, this view was attacked by some other activists such as Yedu and Ye Yin who believe that the regime of the Party should be completely undermined. As Yedu and Ye Yin elaborated,

‘Some people have unrealistic imagination, hoping to realise China’s democratic transformation without needing to pay much. Very few people can face up to the question that if the Party really did not change their principle, what should we do? I don’t believe in the idea of the top-down reform as long as the Communist Party is still governing the country. So I certainly am not convinced by the view that citizens’ action can push the Party-state to make change’. – Yedu

‘We see from so many cases that the authorities never actually had direct conversation with the people protesting. The official institutions never talk to you about what you protest. They only arrest you. Some people thought that by taking action they could force the government to respond. So they limit their action to the level that would not irritate the authorities much and that they can use the current law for self-defence. It is naïve to have this expectation and people with this thought end up reducing the validity of their action for nothing’.  
– Ye Yin

Despite a certain level of conflict between participants, the *Southern Weekly* Incident demonstrated that the various political views did not hinder coherent action taking place in the protest. It should be understood that their collectivity is indicative of a public sphere ‘in formation’ in China. Ultimately, all these activists demanded transformation of the regime and the establishment of a civil society in China. They believed in the necessity of presenting confrontation and resistance to the authorities through taking street action. As Sui commented,

‘What’s different is not our political values but what we believe to be the possible future of China, and this aspiration leads to a methodology we feel is most efficient. Some want fundamental change, while some want mild change.'
Some want peaceful transformation, while some only believe in radical movements. The arguments are sometimes only a voice competition, and they don’t cause big problems for taking action together. Because action is after all individual. Each person just needs to do what he/she wants.’

With the primary goal of mobilising citizens, collective action, for activists were always opportunities to ‘help citizens reduce fears of confrontation’, as Yedu saw it. Yedu explained, ‘any action of confrontation and resistance undermines the regime in some way, and as this type of action accumulates, gradually we can see the transformation’. The *Southern Weekly* Incident was in this sense meaningful for activists. Sui commented that the *Southern Weekly* protest also was significant at the particular time in that it ‘to some extent completed the integration of the activist community in Guangzhou’, which Guo had been long committed to.

With extensive experience of participating in political action such as the protest in the *Southern Weekly* Incident, activists in my interviews showed a common attitude of contempt for imprisonment. As Yedu elaborated,

‘In many previous cases of holding signs to protest in Guangdong, normally activists were detained for a few days. I saw the *Southern Weekly* Incident as merely one of these cases. I assumed that lifting signs for protesting outside Southern Media would at most result in a 10 days detention, and this is nothing. I was put in prison for half a year in 2011.’

As Ye Yin also explained,

‘I used to be frightened of prisons, but then I saw so many friends experienced prison and they looked fine after they were released. I haven’t done much in all these years, so it will not be a big loss if I was jailed for a few years. Of course the life inside [the prison] would be hard, but I think it's all exaggerated. I will be ok with that. I don’t feel scared of that anymore.’

Sui argued that some activists saw imprisonment as an occasion for building their reputation and enhancing their influence in the activist circle. As he saw it, ‘Being imprisoned for too long will stop them doing important business, but some time like a few years is affordable for them. There has got to be people paying the price for change of the country anyway.’

Though it is fair to say that risk assessment posed a smaller issue for the activists than for other citizens, risk assessment was still important for activists. Feeling fearless did not imply that activists did nothing to avoid imprisonment. Activists in my interviews explained that they had limits for action. They were always ‘prepared to act strongly and fearlessly and pay the price in order to express appeals, but restrict action to within a limit’. Technologies, as the activists in my interviews argued, had provided them with an effective guise. As they saw it, the use of social
media was challenging the authorities, making it difficult for the authorities to accuse particular activists of organising and leading a particular event.

Activists in the Southern Street Movement, for example, claimed that their action took the format of volunteer cooperation which involved ‘no organisation, no leaders, no action agenda’ (HXWQ, 2014). The point is made in the following expression (HXWQ, 2014),

> The activists in the Southern Street Movement individually take public action for social issues, then through social media, a set of symbols of their action will be generated and this online publicity may attract more supporters and participants… The confronting formats of the Southern Street Movement, in particular the use of social media, are the subversion of traditional way of confronting the authorities.

The claim of action as non-organised, involving no leadership and no agenda, for activists, was ‘a means of reducing political risks of being accused of organising gatherings’. For some activists, being able to make this claim in some way reduced their fear of action. It was also drawing on the utilisation of Weibo, activists in the Southern Weekly Incident claimed that they did not formally organise the protest. As they explained, they initiated the action and then ‘let the Internet do the work of broadcasting their action and mobilising more people to come’. In other words, the activists mobilised their counterparts to join the protest without directly organising them.

There are a few characteristics of the activists in the Southern Weekly Incident I would like to summarise to understand their determination of activism.

As individuals, first they each had personal experience which they regarded as unjust and unfair that was still powerfully influencing their current lives. Some of them, as we saw, participated in the 1989 student movement which had a life-long impact. Most of them had experienced confrontation against the authorities in the past, through which an activist network may also be introduced to them.

Second, most of them were skilful and active in using the Internet particularly social media. Many of the influential activists were active in online discussion forums in the early years and had been active in writing and publishing blogs that commented on social affairs. For example, Yedu was the founder of the Democracy and Freedom forum and later worked for the Independent Chinese PEN Centre. He had been publishing many articles on overseas websites and in Hong Kong media. Ye Yin specialised in network programming and website design. He had also published many observations and commentaries of social cases on forums and blogs. Besides using Weibo and WeChat, they had also adopted other messaging apps, such as Telegram and Viber, which were less known in China and which they believed to be relatively free from government censoring.
Third, as a community, they may have different types of aspirations and opinions about the ways of realising transformation, but to make change was a consensual desire for all of them. Drawing on the variety of Chinese ideologies which I discussed in Chapter 3, among the activists there were the relatively modest reformists who endorse transformation of the current system and the extremely radical reformists who intend to undermine the current regime. All endorse liberalism and democracy. They were determined actors who, to some extent, devoted themselves to street action. Most of them were willing to take the risk to a certain limit. They passionately contributed to mobilising more people to participate in street action and strengthening the coalition of the people. This goal of the community was simply to mobilise more people to speak out, to confront the authorities, and specifically, to protest. As Hui felt after he joined the community,

‘I think what we are doing is facilitating the unity of all the individuals and strengthening the power of the people as a unit. In this way we get the people ready for working at the right moment to make something big’.

The activist network played a significant role in facilitating collective action through the use of the Internet. In the way that messages of contention were passed between activists on social media and through messaging apps, the whole network was mobilised.

Surely there was no absolute boundary between the activists group and the majority of citizens who went to protest for the newspaper, given the fact that the membership of the activist community was vaguely maintained at this stage and activists may also be loyal readers of the newspaper who simply intended to protest the suffering of the newspaper. The connection between the activist group and other protesters was however obvious. First, the activists’ action, which was taken before most citizens went to protest and present flowers, enhanced the momentum of online discussion of the case, which attracted more citizens’ attention to the case and mobilised the discussion that facilitated their action later. Second, as I have shown, some citizens then became members of the activist community, regularly participating in street action after the Southern Weekly Incident.

5.2.4. The ‘others’

In the Southern Weekly protest there were other protesters who cannot be categorised into the two types of protesters I introduced in the last three sections. They were either individuals or small groups. From the angle of examining social mobilisation, these people’s action also revealed part of the social culture that should not be neglected in my examination of the Chinese context. It is also important to examine the meanings these actors gave to their actions in order to understand the various reasons that can trigger action in a particular case. However, it is also impossible to investigate all the individuals’ action in a case of such scale. Here I introduce two groups: the Sanshan villager group and Mao’s supporters.

On 10 January, about 20 farmers from the rural village of Sanshan (a suburb of Guangzhou) joined in the protest outside Southern Media office buildings. In 2011, Sanshan villagers protested
the illegal land seizure issue in their village. Southern Metropolis Daily back then reported on the Sanshan village government confiscating agricultural land. As Sui, who was the lawyer of the 2011 Sanshan village case observed in the villagers’ participation in the Southern Weekly protest, the villagers’ emotion was quickly fuelled after they heard that Southern Media was suppressed, and this was because they felt connected to Southern Metropolis Daily and Southern Media after the newspaper deternimely reported their case. As Sui suggested, the villagers first wanted to support Southern Media, but more importantly, they intended to air their grievances about illegal land seizures in their village outside the press. The villagers were removed by police and detained in a middle school to be questioned.

The Sanshan villagers may be representative of those who joined the Southern Weekly protesting groups but mainly protested issues that were not relevant to the Southern Weekly Incident itself. In short, they were the ‘others’ within the Southern Weekly protest. To be more specific, they initiated the protest in the name of supporting the media, then they used the crowds and the venue as the background to protest for their needs. Their action may be also argued to be another protest departing from the Southern Weekly protest. However, given their initial motivation of joining protest to supporting the newspaper, their group behaviour indeed enhanced the momentum of the Southern Weekly protest as a whole. In a general sense, their action resulted in promoting the confrontation of the Southern Weekly Incident.

A group of extreme supporters of Mao also appeared in the Southern Weekly protest, creating dramatic effects on the site. They protested against Southern Weekly, accusing Southern Media as traitors colluding with Western media.

‘Support the Communist Party; Support Mao Zedong Thought; Support to combat the media of traitors Southern Media’

A banner containing these words and a huge portrait of Mao, in the pro-democracy protest outside Southern Media, seemed to stand out, though not alone. Despite the group of Mao’s supporters in the protest being disproportionate in numbers (around 10 people each day out of the total number of near 300), their fighting against the pro-democracy protesters in the scene created a disturbing voice that was not anticipated by other protesters. The dramatic effect was created when somebody put a five-mao bank note by the banner-holder’s feet and shouted, ‘your money dropped out’. Giving five-mao notes to the pro-Party people was a gesture indicating the common recognition of those people as Wu Mao people who were hired by the Party to spread pro-Party ideologies and disrupt confrontational discussion (it was said that they were paid five mao (about £0.05) per post to intentionally direct online discussion), and it was seen a few times during the protest. The real-time verbal conflicts were broadcast on Weibo. For example, the following conversation was recorded and uploaded to Weibo:

‘Why do we need to learn from America? Why don’t we let the Americans learn from us? The whole world envied us in Mao’s age.’ Said a Mao supporter.
‘You are very little educated. I don’t want to talk to you.’ Said a citizen.

‘I am little educated, but I know Chairman Mao was great. You are more educated, but useless. How can you be anti-Mao!’ Said the Mao’s supporter.

There reportedly were some protesters from April Media (formerly Anti-CNN)\(^{34}\), a website established by a 23-year-old Chinese university student in 2008 which claimed to break the monopoly of Western discourse, identifying the lies and distortions of China in Western media, and spreading the truth, and others from Utopia\(^{35}\) which was a website established in 2003 promoting Marxist and Maoist thought. These people were considered leftists who had an extreme nationalistic and patriotic orientation.

Along with the comment that activists utilised the Southern Weekly Incident as an opportunity to air their political resistance to the authorities and to practise mass social mobilisation, some journalists made similar comment that the leftists utilised the Southern Weekly Incident for advocating the leftist extremism. As a senior employee in Southern Weekly argued,

‘The incident was like any current social event that is always used by the left and the right for their political propaganda. The common and most defining characteristics of both the extreme left and extreme right is that they never really care about the fact itself when they come to an event.

Surely, protest being taken for airing various political opinions in some way shows the process of formation of a public sphere in China. The drama staged in the protest in the Southern Weekly Incident was fascinating for many people not only because it proved the existence of either the genuine Maoists or Wu Mao cluster, but more so that it was rare in post-1989 China that ideological conflicts were publicly presented between citizens, though hardly a real debate. Ideological debates had hardly unfolded on the street since the early 1990s. Though many Chinese people have learnt from foreign media about the existence of Wu Mao and sometimes mock and condemn their intention to manipulate China’s belief system, such rumours of Wu Mao remain only fascinating stories feeding people’s curiosity.

The flexibility of the format of people’s action and the complexity of people’s drive to action in the Southern Weekly Incident made it impossible to clearly divide groups in action. The purposes of grouping different types of actors in the protest through later analysis are, first, to closely examine the formats, procedures, and levels of action; and second, to carefully understand various type of goals, motivations, emotions, and considerations of actors. The dynamics and mechanisms, and

\(^{34}\) The website of April Media: [http://www.m4.cn/](http://www.m4.cn/)

\(^{35}\) The website of Utopia: [http://www.wyzxwk.com/](http://www.wyzxwk.com/). Since its establishment, Utopia had been actively touting Chongqing model which is directed by Bo Xilai, who led a propagandist style leadership in Chongqing and was found guilty of corruption and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2013. In April 2012 when Bo was being investigated, the website of Utopia [http://www.wyzxwk.com/](http://www.wyzxwk.com/) was shut down. It was reopened later in 2012 and redirected to [http://www.wyzxwk.com/](http://www.wyzxwk.com/).
the relationship between journalists’ online action and other people’s offline protest are further analysed in Chapter 6.

5.3. The results and the legacy

For some people, the outcome of the Southern Weekly Incident was a disappointment. The one-week incident, which was initiated as a confrontation with Chinese censorship, ended without creating new opportunities for Chinese press freedoms. With the agreement of Southern Media Group to replace the Chief Editor of Southern Weekly, internal negotiations within Southern Weekly ensured that journalists in Southern Weekly stopped discussing the relevant issues and went back to work. The authorities also agreed not to punish active journalists who promoted the event. Some Southern Media employees suggested, in my interviews, that less forceful regulation had been noted in Southern Media Group during the remainder of 2013 - for example, the pre-censorship process, which requires editors to submit plans to the censors even before the report is conducted, was cancelled. However, my follow up interviews in 2014 with some journalists indicated the media control was being tightened again in 2014. In short, the fundamental issue of censorship remained ingrained in the media system after the Southern Weekly Incident. Some journalists clearly claimed that general media regulation and online space had been tightened since the Southern Weekly Incident. As a journalist described, ‘Once you struggle, you find the chain becomes tighter.’ This remains to be explored from a long-term perspective.

The testimony episode at the end of 2013 added an echo to the Southern Weekly Incident. Three activists joining the Southern Weekly protest in January were charged and Southern Media issued a testimony to assist in the prosecution of activists (more discussion about the testimony episode is introduced in Chapter 7). This episode did not revive the confrontation but further showed the complexity of institutional regulation in China, which is an important theme of my research.

My research is more concerned with how a case of collective democratic action takes place rather than whether it achieves its goals. As a case of collective action in current China where political action is strictly repressed, it matters more as a case of social mobilisation than as a case of media struggle. In this sense, I would like to point out that in the Chinese context, voicing opinions about such a sensitive issue like censorship to initiate discussion is itself a great achievement for democratisation of the society. In the 2013 Southern Weekly Incident, journalists revealed their piled-up grievances about censorship to the authorities, although they limited their action online. Citizens’ online and offline action aired their resistance to censorship and demanded a reconsideration of media regulation from the state, demonstrating the power of the Internet. It would not be possible to see this without the facilitation of the Internet in the digital age. Surely, the consideration of the legacy of the Southern Weekly Incident would have to include the effects of latent networks and the formation of a Chinese public sphere.
Chapter 6 The mechanisms, framework, and form of action in the Southern Weekly Incident

Concerned with the questions of why and how the Southern Weekly Incident developed and ended in its particular form, this chapter provides my account of the peculiar mechanisms and forms of action in the Southern Weekly Incident. My analysis also demonstrates the factors that led to segmentation of action, which directly linked to the decline and end of the incident. I first analyse journalists and citizens’ embodiment experiences in the Southern Weekly Incident, highlighting various emotions and people’s past experiences. I discuss the emotion of moral shame as a mechanism that shaped a distinct dynamic in journalists’ action. I then examine a framework of connective action in the Southern Weekly Incident, focusing on diverse appeals of journalists, citizens, and activists who were involved in the Southern Weekly Incidents and their personalised expressions. Finally, I discuss the form of online and offline action being seemingly segmented in the Southern Weekly Incident.

6.1. The mechanisms of embodiment and emotions

6.1.1. ‘It was just so exciting that I wanted to keep posting, reposting…’

‘I cannot remember how many of my reports were killed last year since Tuo arrived. On one occasion last year I had six reports killed in a row. No matter how much this was directly associated with Tuo’s censoring, my emotion was pushed up after I heard the news about the New Year Edition. I just felt excited and wanted to keep reposting those posts, the declarations, the statements, the open letters that supported Southern Weekly until Tuo was sent away, and I felt hopeful about this good opportunity’.

This statement made by a journalist of Southern Media revealed her motive for online posting in the Southern Weekly Incident, which can be analysed through the grammar of embodiment. In the experience of embodiment, physicality and emotionality should be understood as symbiotic and interlocked, and a sense of connectivity with other people was confirmed. As the journalist revealed through the above explanation, she kept reposting, remembering her articles being killed, feeling excited in taking action, and feeling hopeful of the possible change brought about by her and other people’s posting. Her emotions were loaded with her past experience, through which she felt the suffering of Southern Weekly counterparts. She carried out posting, which connected her to an online network and generated excitement and hope.

In my interviews which were conducted nearly one year after the Southern Weekly Incident ended, the emotions of outrage, excitement, humiliation, sadness, shame and insult, frustration, and so on during the unfolding of the incident were still vividly expressed by most journalists and citizens involved. They described these emotions to reveal their motivation of online posting or offline protest. Linking these emotions to their actions is a way of understanding their experience of
embodiment, which, through the process of connective action, was key to implementing action in the incident.

Emotional resonance was mobilised among journalists immediately after the news of the modification of *Southern Weekly* was released on Weibo, and reached climaxes among journalists and citizens at various points during the incident. The releasing of *Southern Weekly*’s first open letter initiated the first strong emotional blow through a group wider than Southern Media. The co-signing of three open letters enhanced a genuine feeling among journalists and citizens that they were collectively involved in a huge-scale petition, and with the number of people who signed the letters becoming larger, a sense of commitment was strongly felt by citizens.

The seizure of *Southern Weekly*’s official Weibo account by the Chief Editor indeed enraged many journalists who regarded *Southern Weekly* as an ideal place of promoting justice, equality, and other universal values in Chinese society. They felt the newspaper that encapsulated their journalism dreams was tarnished. As one of the *Southern Weekly* employees described, ‘I felt *Southern Weekly* would be finished if that untrue information spread. This newspaper encapsulates many journalists’ dreams. We cannot let it finish in our hands.’ At this point, many more journalists who were not committed at the earlier stage joined in the reposting relay. Media employees all over China posted on Weibo to mourn the death of Chinese journalism, denounce evil forces, and call for more people to speak out in order not to ‘indulge evil forces’, as exemplified by the following posts which were posted by some influential media workers and were widely reposted on 6 January.

**@Yuan Guobao:**
‘Who is indulging the evil forces? … When people were all looking forward to the fresh air that might be brought about by new policies, their hope was defeated again by the abuse of power…. The call for justice did not bring any change. People’s opinions were again raped. The indulgent of darkness is the worst damage of justice. Weibo lurkers, did you see this?’

**@Liu Junning:**
‘All the people know the dawn is coming, yet only you [the authorities] are still holding fast to the darkness.’

**@Mu Rong Xue Cun:**
‘Calling white black and black white. [They] used to be secretively cruel and now are openly cruel. When the powerful throw out all senses of shame, the powerless should stand up and save [the country]. Tonight will be recorded in history. If now you are weak, you will be weak forever. If now you fear, you will fear forever. Dark clouds have filled the sky, so weak people please look up at the sky together, using our sights to shine on this long dark night. The wind
is bitingly cold, so cold people please warm each other, using our temperature to melt this whole world of ice.’

@Lian Qing Chuang:
‘… For more than 30 years, several generations of journalists have been using blood and tears to protect it [Southern Weekly]. But all is destroyed tonight, in such a bloody way…’

@Mary Ling Shan:
‘I am not left or right. I don’t like advocating justice and democracy. But I long for freedom and believe in human rights and law. Tonight I am here – supporting the fight for dignity. If failed, we are still standing. Never be the slaves who are kneeling.’

Identity ties between Chinese media workers were strengthened with action being pursued and witnessed. The publication of the editorial in Global Times generated much anger among journalists, while the episode of Beijing News confronting the Beijing Propaganda officer to resist reprinting the Global Times editorial set off another wave of emotional resonance which was at the same time publicly experienced through Weibo. As we can see from one of the Beijing News journalist’s following post (CDT, 2013b),

@Yu Guo Tian Xin (9 January):
‘Tonight, I remember every one of our tears, remember the unanimous democratic vote against the re-printing [of the editorial], remember the sobbing sound in the layout room, remember every single sigh, remember the sound of the beer can being opened, remember everyone standing still, remember our colleagues’ expectation, remember all the brothers who appeared at the newsroom upon receiving the call. Please remember tonight’s humiliation. Let’s remember all of it.’

There were certainly various forms of emotional resonance. While some citizens and journalists outside Southern Weekly vividly recounted the emotions they had during the Southern Weekly Incident with high spirits, many Southern Weekly employees in my interviews claimed that Southern Weekly staff were ‘passive actors’. A senior editor of Southern Weekly provided the following account to explain how the decisions of posting declarations, statements, and open letters were made by Southern Weekly internal staff:

‘When you [pointing to senior staff in Southern Media Group, the same onwards] decided to conduct criminal proceedings to the people who first released the news about the New Year Edition being modified, we felt that we had to tell people the truth, clarifying that the newspaper was indeed modified and those people were not rumourmongers. Though we did not necessarily
agree with what they did [releasing the news online], we got to protect them as they spoke for us and there was a brotherhood here. When you wanted to tell people that all the superficial mistakes of the New Year Edition were made totally by the Southern Weekly editors on our own, we had to defend ourselves to tell people that we did not edit that part of the writing and it was modified by you without letting us know. When you wanted to post a message on our Weibo account claiming that the propaganda department had nothing to do with the modification, we of course would not agree. Then when you forcefully seized the Weibo account and posted that message, we had to stand up to tell people the message posted there did not represent our voice any more. Then when you quibbled by arguing that Minister Tuo did not directly conduct the modification and accused us of slander, we had to tell people how the propaganda department worked in cooperation with the senior staff of the media [Southern Media Group] in conducting the censoring of the newspaper, and we finally had to post the investigative report of the incident. It was a mutual simulation step by step, and gradually we were irritated enough to release more information.’

Interestingly, the senior editor discussed his emotions during this process in an understated manner, with the emphasis that Southern Weekly employees ‘had no intention of action’, rather than feeling motivated. He described moments of emotional eruption during the Southern Weekly Incident as ‘a process of mutual simulation’ between Southern Weekly staff and the authorities. While the authorities were gradually intensifying their control of the incident, journalists were irritated to piece-by-piece release more information on Weibo which apparently generated higher level of control. This explanation was commonly agreed by other Southern Weekly employees in my interviews. Another senior Southern Weekly editor explained that they mainly felt lost and did not know how to deal with the situation. He recalled that he felt ‘very lost and bewildered by the unpredictable future of the newspaper, but somehow touched and moved by what was happening, and sometimes felt a strong sense of emotional torment’.

Obviously, emotions in journalists’ ‘passive action’ or ‘action after being irritated’ were complex, but not simply passive. Indeed, the online posting of Southern Weekly employees demonstrated that the so-called passive emotions in them worked powerfully to trigger their action which, in the context of connective action in digital age, was able to mobilise mass civic participation in an event. It was this emotional irritation that initiated and step by step carried forward the information release which was crucial for facilitating the unfolding of the case. This essential information, being so irritating for many other people outside Southern Weekly, immediately provoked citizens’ emotion which echoed with Southern Weekly staff’s emotion and further triggered the online and offline confrontations.
Expression was itself the goal of their action (Wood, 2001). Through the shifts in emotions (Barker, 2001), they experienced moments turning from outrage to pride, depression to confrontation. Rituals facilitated by physical gathering and intimate ties, which effectively enhanced the mechanisms of reducing fear in traditional offline protest (Goodwin and Pfaff, 2001), also powerfully mobilised emotions and embodiment among journalists in the Southern Weekly Incident. Simply we see the example that the first messages revealing the New Year Edition being modified were released on Weibo after the information was shared between a group of journalists having a New Year gathering in Yunnan. The moral support and encouragement (Goodwin and Pfaff, 2001) between them should not be dismissed in understanding their embodied action.

To give another example, on the night of Southern Weekly’s Weibo account being seized, Southern Weekly staff in Guangzhou secretly gathered in a hotel to discuss ways of resisting. It is an inconspicuous hotel near Southern Media company and there, squashed in two rooms, journalists and editors from Southern Weekly were sad and somewhat fearful. As one journalist recalled, a senior editor cried when he arrived in the room. Another editor shouted, ‘what’s the point of crying. Quickly go draft the statement!’ Suddenly the depressing atmosphere was broken and an editor who was normally quiet also spoke out, ‘don’t panic. No resignations from now on. We are going to fight through with them!’ That night, they drafted and issued the statement co-signed by 97 staff from Southern Weekly, declaring that the official Weibo account of Southern Weekly was taken over forcibly by the Chief Editor of the newspaper who represented the company, and successively, they posted messages revealing the process of the authorities seizing the Weibo account and then the updated investigation report reviewing what happened during the production and the modification of the New Year Edition. On the same night in the Beijing office of Southern Weekly, journalists gathered to repost information of declaration. As a journalist described,

‘We all took our laptops to the office, like going on a battle. We registered many Weibo accounts and made sure that they would not be all closed and there were always accounts to be used for reposting the planned statements and declaration. So we arranged to do the posting in turns and use different accounts in turn. That atmosphere and the tension reminded me of my experience of reporting Sichuan earthquake in 2008. At that time journalists from all over China gathered in a hotel in Sichuan, taking turns to sleep and waited for the updated information.’

It was demonstrated in the Southern Weekly Incident that the Internet to some extent introduced new ways of presenting rituals which also generated a sense of mass gathering and promoted embodiment. For example, a group of journalists changed the name of their WeChat group account to ‘the most shameful night’ on the night when Southern Weekly’s official Weibo account was seized. The name change was a ritual mediated through online platform intending to remind the group members of humiliation and mobilise resistant action.
Through journalists’ embodied online posting, emotions of people online were further generated. Apparently, a sense of justice was passed on by journalists through the posts to ordinary citizens online. Examples of idealism and heroism were increasingly triggering citizens to stand up and voice their indignation of the authorities. With many online citizens’ sympathy of the newspaper being deepened by the emotional Weibo posts, more and more citizens joined the relay of reposting declarations written by Southern Weekly staff.

Embodiment of citizens was most obviously seen in their protest outside Southern Media office buildings. Rituals in the form of presenting flowers, singing, making speeches, and art performance made mobilisation at the site efficient. As a citizen bystander in the protest described,

'It was a much more direct and striking feeling when I went to the scene, compared to sitting in front of the computer. So many people were presenting flowers, and some were taking photos with the flowers. I saw so many banners and signs. People were creating their signs at the scene. Then the speeches started, and then more and more people made speeches, successively, and the atmosphere got more and more exciting. I was so mobilised and quickly posted many photos online'.

Unusual energy and solidarity (Goodwin and Pfaff, 2001) were created at the protesting site. The citizen Wei’s spontaneous speeches were a demonstration of the energy created by the atmosphere and rituals at the site. Wei was approaching the gate to Southern Media when he saw huge crowds gathering outside the press with many people presenting flowers. He felt ‘the sudden energy of having to do something’, as he recalled. His memory of witnessing somebody making a speech was activated and in no time he found himself standing on the edge of the flower bed speaking to the crowds loudly. His speech mobilised more people to make speeches and some people started singing.

For some people, online embodiment seemed to be more effective than embodiment operating in offline worlds. A citizen who was both active online and in offline protest explained how online information powerfully facilitated his emotional eruption. As he put it,

‘During those few days I saw so much information aggregated and presented to me, all was irritating information, but I did not have somebody to talk to face-to-face. It made me feel fed up and sick and my emotion just needed to erupt and generate action. I am not easily irritated in face-to-face communication, but online it just happened.’

Citizens’ photography and films of the speeches and singing were posted on Weibo. They continually stimulated online citizens’ emotions and created an atmosphere inviting identification with the online voices. Identification with the movement (Goodwin and Pfaff, 2001) was an effective mechanism of citizen mobilisation of embodiment in the Southern Weekly Incident. Fears
may be reduced when people identify themselves with a collective identity (Goodwin and Pfaff, 2001), and in the Southern Weekly Incident, this identification is with the repressed and suffering people as a whole. As we can see from these below expressions,

‘As students of journalism, we place higher value on the New Year Greetings of Southern Weekly than on other articles. Killing a New Year Greeting made us feel pessimistic and frustrated, like idealism was dead. I felt so angry and shameful and I wanted to be together with the huge supporting army…’ – a journalism student

‘I saw so many media employees struggling. At the end they still had to give up their official Weibo accounts. Although they were not able to say much, we felt the despair between their simple words. I felt so moved by the effort they had made and such urgency that I should stand up for them. It is time for me to step forward.’ - Hui, a protester outside the press

‘I saw people saying that they were going to present flowers, and I thought, how could I not go with them?’ – Wei, a protester outside the press

In some ways, citizens identified themselves with the journalists and the newspaper, and other angry citizens. Similarly, the collective identity of being an activist trying to change China was commonly recognised by members of the activist community and mobilised their protest.

Citizens’ action in the Southern Weekly Incident was certainly embodied. Some protesters described their protesting as being impulsive. Admittedly, feeling impulsive was part of their emotion that drove them to take action. However, impulsiveness in the involvement of a collective action in the Chinese environment, where risks obviously existed, should be understood as part of the emotion rather than an impetus. To be specific, the impulse was not the motive that explained their action, but an abrupt inclination of emotion that did not irrationally arrive out of nowhere, but was embedded in their personal histories. As we can see from the examples of Xiang, Wei, Hui, and Kai, this impulse was generated by their long-term readership of Southern Weekly or Southern Media, their desire for speaking freedom which had been suppressed in their daily lives, and the anger accumulated in previous experiences of power abuse by the authorities. Xiang’s frustrating work censoring online posts, Hui’s helplessness in facing injustice in his legal case, their affection of the newspaper and disappointment about the decline of the newspaper, Wei’s stiff negotiation with local authorities in running his LGBT centre, and Kai’s suffering from feeling the unfairness in his business, all facilitated the emotions during the Southern Weekly Incident which brought their emotions to bursting point.

The joy shown by some of the activists in my interviews, when they excitedly shared in detail their experience of participating in the Southern Weekly protest, reflected the pride and pleasure (Wood, 2001) they experienced in the participation. They appeared to be enjoying the pleasure
again when reaching the memory of the pleasure through recalling their experience in the incident. The willingness to expose their real identities in my research also to a certain level demonstrated their pride in the *Southern Weekly* Incident. Understanding this emotion has to take into account many activists’ previous confrontation against power abuse, and their unforgettable memories of 1989 student movement.

The timing of and the expectation of the outcome of taking action are crucial factors in determining how possible embodiment would be experienced, in the way that emotions can shift to the level where action is expected. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, Xi’s new leadership at the beginning of 2013 inspired optimism about a more liberal China. Yan, the university lecturer who took and posted many photos of the protest on Weibo, admitted his optimism about the outcome of the case and the possible change of news censoring. As he explained, he thought that ‘Tuo would have to leave this time’. He saw what Tuo did as being in ‘violation of the great undertaking which was strongly promoted by the new leadership at that time’. This kind of subjective judgement brought much room for positive imagination, especially seeing the potential for victory which helped to implement the shifts of emotions from being negative to positive, mitigating fears caused by the sensitivity of the issue at stake.

Similarly, some activists also confessed that although they did not definitely feel positive about the political change brought about by the new leadership, they somehow saw certain potential in the change of political ecology and wanted to test the new leadership. Yedu, the influential figure in the activist community, observed that many activists hoped that the *Southern Weekly* Incident could become an opportunity to start an interaction between the authorities and citizens. In an article published online by Guo Feixiong in January 2013 after the *Southern Weekly* protest, Guo wrote positively about what he saw in the *Southern Weekly* Incident. He set a high value on both the citizens’ action and the tolerance of the authorities, and suggested that the reform of the new government was foreseeable (Guo, 2013). Apparently, Guo had positive aspirations for the new leadership and failed to foresee the account that would be settled with him afterwards. Yedu recalled that Guo confessed in a conversation with him that his judgement about Beijing supporting the civil action in the *Southern Weekly* protest somewhat motivated him to make public speeches at the site. Yet, the consequence of the protest - many activists were briefly detained and Guo Feixiong and the other two were officially arrested for being engaged in this case - was somewhat unexpected for many activists who were obviously experienced in activism.

In general, embodiment in various forms and promoted by particular contingent factors in the *Southern Weekly* Incident was an effective mechanism facilitating people’s action, linking people’s physicality and emotionality and strengthening their connection with other people. Embodiment can be a process of encountering the vulnerable self (McDonald, 2006). It is in understanding people’s past experience where their emotions were embedded that the experience of embodiment in the *Southern Weekly* Incident may be understood. I will review this
historical account in the next section to complete my examination of embodiment in the *Southern Weekly* Incident.

6.1.2. ‘We all had been suffering for the whole career…’

Emotions, which are essential in the mechanism of embodiment, are embedded in people’s life experiences and entwined with social and cultural cognitions (Goodwin et al., 2001). Emotions of the journalists in the *Southern Weekly* Incident were obviously not suddenly generated by the modification of the New Year Edition, but accumulated long-term in journalists’ daily work in which censorship on various levels determined what topics and which angles of the particular topic they were allowed to be reported. The following confession, made by a commentator of *Southern Metropolis Daily*, revealed the emotions that were also found in many other journalists’ account in my interviews:

‘Being a journalist, we have been reporting so many cases of safeguarding legal rights. This time we became the subjects in a case of defending our rights. How can we be quiet? There have been many times when our newspaper had similar cases, but on much smaller scale and was internally digested – repressed by the internal senior staff of the newspaper, so we have been angry for a long time. This time the censoring by the Provincial Propaganda Department was directly exposed on the Internet, so of course I am going to use the opportunity to make a scene. Doing a journalistic job for many of us is not only a job or a career, but a dream. For many journalists in our generation, *Southern Weekly* is the place where the journalism dream starts. *Southern Weekly* has been the most representative front in China for pursuing universal values of human beings. But I am really not happy now. This job does not give me the sense of honour any more, but only disgrace. We see so many discussions online about all sorts of social problems, but as commentators we cannot write about those topics which are so important for the current China. We are like co-conspirators with the Communist authorities working for sheltering the real history and castrating people’s memory. I feel guilty. It is not only about singing the praises of the current regime, but the worst thing is that we, as journalists and commentators, we dishonestly shelter the truth, and in this way we create a twisted and disgusting version of Chinese history. We cannot even comment on those topics online because of our identities representing media. I might be happier if I worked as a taxi driver or a post courier. This time, the authorities really crossed the line.’

Working as a senior editor of the news magazine *Southern People Weekly* (also belonging to South Media and was affiliated to *Southern Weekly* when established), Li Jian, like many other senior managers of each media in Southern Media, was required by senior staff of Southern Media to control staff’s heated discussions about the incident. As Li Jian recalled,
‘We could not say we supported our staff being so active during the case, but we did not want to stop them, though we obviously were required by the senior staff of Southern Media Group to regulate and restrict the behaviour of our staff in the case. We understood why they were so active as we all had been suffering for the whole career. We told those above that we were not able to control our staff. Of course those above would not be happy with us, but I don’t care.’

Journalists’ anger towards the particular propaganda minister Tuo, who had been in post for about one year, obviously contributed to mobilisation in the *Southern Weekly* Incident. Journalists accused Tuo of an abnormal level of censoring compared to previous propaganda officers. The suffering of the past year was felt strongly when *Southern Weekly* Incident took place. As a seasoned employee of Southern Media saw it,

‘In November last year the 18th Party Congress was held. We have always known that any time around important political occasions our media reports are strictly regulated. It was understandable that they tightened the restriction of reports before and during the 18th Party Congress. However, we expected the restriction to become looser after the Congress but it turned out to be even tighter. So the target was automatically towards Tuo. He was sent by the National Central Government, parachuted into Guangzhou and obviously not quite fitting in.’

As staff of *Southern Weekly* and *Southern People Weekly* revealed, the censoring of their reports had been changed from ‘post-censoring’ to ‘pre-censoring’ since Tuo became the propaganda minister at the end of 2011. Specifically, reports in *Southern Weekly* and *Southern People Weekly* used to be censored before they were published, but in the policy of ‘pre-censoring’, editors of these two media had been required to inform the propaganda department of proposed reports before they were written. As a *Southern People Weekly* editor revealed,

‘We used to know where their line was and how to play the game. But then with the pre-censoring, we were deprived of any opportunity to play. There had been many times when our topics were rejected – most obvious in the news section [compared to sections for soft news] – and we had to run with blank pages or advertising in its place. So when the *Southern Weekly* Incident

36 The National Congress of the Communist Party of China is a party congress of CPC that is held once every five years. It is theoretically the highest body within the Chinese Communist Party to decide issues regarding the top leadership transition and others. The 18th Party Congress was held in November, 2012. For information about the 18th Party Congress, see http://www.china.org.cn/china/18th_cpc_congress/2012-09/28/content_26735707.htm
emerged, we thought that at least we should vent what we had experienced during the past year.’

Particularly for Southern Weekly staff, repression associated with the particular Propaganda Minister and the Chief Editor was felt even more during the whole month of producing the New Year Edition since early December 2012. The whole month of negotiation between journalists and editors with the Chief Editor and the Guangdong Propaganda Department was frustrating. As the original author of the New Year Greeting revealed, 90% of the content of his original article had been changed after his first draft was adjusted a few times following the requirements from the above (Guan, 2014). Many articles were removed during the negotiation and the total number of sub-sections in the New Year Edition were reduced from 16 to 12 by the end. In the finalisation stage, five editors in charge worked three whole nights in a row to make sure the final version did not contain any ‘mistakes’. However, the final version was still modified after finalisation.

Many previous staff of Southern Media formed a strong coalition to support Southern Weekly and helped organise an online petition. For most of them, Southern Media was both a place where they started to pursue their journalism idealism and where they suffered from censorship. Their suffering while working for the company was deeply rooted in their memory.

Besides a collective suffering, there were many stories to tell about each journalist’s suffering in a journalist career in China, which powerfully mobilised embodiment in their involvement in the Southern Weekly Incident. Limited by space, I will only present several emblematic stories from Southern Metropolis Daily staff, Southern People Weekly staff, and Southern Media previous staff, who arguably formed the most active group conducting online posting and promoting the online petition in the Southern Weekly Incident.

Li Jian was one of the three co-founders of Southern People Weekly. In 2003, Li Jian was a journalist and editor of Southern Weekly, where he experienced what he considered as ‘the highest and lowest points’ of his journalistic career. He published two front-page stories about the legal and justice fields which were influential and rewarded him ‘the greatest honour’. He was encouraged by the achievement and took the risks of conducting reports on a few controversial topics including SARS and retired veteran soldiers. However, none of them were allowed to be published in the end. With a number of reports being killed in a row, he felt ‘frustrated and lost in [his] career’. He explained, ‘being a journalist was not paid well but at least you felt what you were doing made a difference to people’s life. It was not the case anymore. I might have left media industries if it was not for the initiation of founding Southern People Weekly’. It was at this point that Mu Tian, who was then a senior editor of Southern Weekly, initiated the idea of founding the

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37 SARS is the viral respiratory disease of severe acute respiratory syndrome which broke out in China at the end of 2002 and caused more than 8,000 cases including close to 800 deaths by July 2003, according to WHO
magazine *Southern People Weekly* which specialises in high-profile figure reporting and in-depth reports of current affairs in China.

Ever since the establishment of *Southern People Weekly* in June 2004, Mu Tian and his colleagues had claimed that the magazine focused on personalities and human influence in the fields of politics, economics, culture, media, arts, and entertainment. The magazine aimed to promote universal values of equality, fairness and humanity in Chinese society. The democratic and liberal temperament of *Southern People Weekly* had assembled journalists who were greatly concerned with journalism idealism and professionalism and many of whom had experienced strict repression in doing news reports in other media.

Mu Tian was 41 when he established *Southern People Weekly*. Before this, he had worked for 15 years for *Southern Weekly* where he witnessed the newspaper becoming extremely influential and starting to suffer from special restrictions employed by the authorities. As he recalled,

‘I asked myself why I wanted to start this magazine. I knew very well that the magazine would suffer from the same pressure and challenges that *Southern Weekly* was experiencing. But I was determined to experience all the challenges, because this was all about being a journalist in China and you got to be prepared if you really wanted to make a difference to China’s journalism.’

Despite being prepared, Mu Tian’s role as Chief Editor was indeed extremely challenging. Only half a year after the magazine was established, Mu Tian was deprived of the title of Chief Editor after the magazine published a special topic of influential public intellectuals in China which contained some controversial figures. As a punishment, the senior officers of Southern Media changed Mu Tian’s title to Associate Chief Editor, though in practice he remained responsible for the main editing of the magazine. He recalled that he felt grateful that the magazine was not completely closed and he was not ejected from working for his magazine. However, two months after the incident of reporting on public intellectuals, another report focusing on National People’s Congress delegates was criticised by the authorities for ‘making mistakes’. This happened on the eve of the Chinese traditional New Year. As Mu Tian recalled, he was with his wife on the way to buy some flowers for celebrating New Year when he received a call from the Provincial Propaganda Department condemning the ‘mistakes’ and commanding him to immediately bring some copies of the magazine to the office of the propaganda department. As he said,

‘Suddenly the mood of celebrating New Year was destroyed. It was very miserable and very sad and I did not know what would happen to the magazine this time. The office of our press was closed for the New Year holiday and I had to drive to a news stand to buy my magazine for sending to the propaganda department. Later I received a call from the senior officers of Southern Media telling me to prepare for submitting a self-criticism report after New Year. For the whole New Year holiday, I was so upset and at some point
I thought, “fuck you, I am not going to play with you anymore.” But I still calmed down, thinking that I was prepared for this since the beginning of doing the magazine. I went through it. Now the magazine is approaching its 10th year of operation).

Mu Tian had submitted 30 self-criticism reports in less than 10 years. He joked about a statement made by his previous boss of Southern Media which stated that the most essential skill for being a journalist in China is knowing how to write a self-criticism report. Here Mu Tian discusses how he drafted a self-criticism report,

‘First you need to admit your mistake and explain why you made such mistake. You should assert to stick to Marxist journalistic viewpoints and follow the correct political guidance for editing. You have to bear the “shame” enforced on you. They slander you by accusing your magazine of making up stories and spreading disinformation. You have to take the blame and admit it by yourself. It is all for the survival of the magazine. Then you have to propose how you are going to deal with this incident, normally something like how you are going to punish the relevant journalists, for example, by cutting down their payment, administer the caution, or issue a demerit, but sometimes if those above decide to sack them then I cannot resist the decision’.

Mu Tian actively reposted many Weibo messages during the Southern Weekly Incident. His posting was regarded as extremely risky by his colleagues in Southern Media, given that he was in a senior position in the company. As he explained,

‘I could not post my own opinions about the issue, but I had no excuse to keep quiet even though it was for self-protection. Southern Weekly and Southern People Weekly were in a similar circumstance of being censored. So I reposted other people’s opinions to represent myself. However, I did not sign those open letters because doing so would really threaten the survival of the magazine.’

Yuan, a journalist who joined Southern People Weekly in 2012, intensively posted information about the progress of the Southern Weekly Incident. She recalled that she was sitting in front of the computer almost all day for three days, at the same time trying to persuade other media staff to repost relevant information. As she admits, she was ‘quite bad for forcefully giving other journalists moral pressure’, but would blame her previous suffering for this impulse, in particular her seven years working for South Daily which is a party organ newspaper where reports are censored on the strictest level. Yuan’s experience was somewhat typical of other journalists working for Southern People Weekly. With less restriction from their Chief Editor, the journalists of Southern People Weekly took the opportunity of the Southern Weekly Incident to strive for their ideas of journalism.
Hong, a previous commentator working for *Southern Metropolis Daily*, was actively engaged in online discussion in the *Southern Weekly* Incident. Hong had been suffering from extreme repression of his writings of editorials since 2008 when he and his colleagues in *Southern Metropolis Daily* produced many influential and controversial editorials addressing issues related to the Beijing Olympic Games and Sichuan earthquake. He was forced to leave *Southern Metropolis Daily* and since 2011 has been working for a magazine which he describes as being ‘in a very marginal position’, with ‘even no office’.

Yu used to work for *Southern Weekly* as an investigative reporter for three years and left to found a magazine in 2008. He recalled that he immediately felt ‘the passion of joining all types of online action’ after hearing the news about the modification. As he explained,

‘I thought about my experience in *Southern Weekly*. I was young and full of energy for doing good reports on those dangerous and controversial investigative stories. I knew that doing investigative reports in China was a race against time and against news regulation. I tried very hard to compete with the timing, trying to get the stories out before the ban arrived. Once I failed, I tried another story. I had the experience of three front-page stories being killed in a row during three weeks. But I was still full of combative force to do more. When the *Southern Weekly* Incident emerged, I understood that *Southern Weekly* staff might not be able to say much as doing so was too risky for those who were still working there. But we, the people who have left the newspaper, had such deep connection with the newspaper that we were very determined to make a scene and take whatever responsibility and risks.’

As I have discussed, citizens involved in either online or offline action had their emotions rooted in their past experiences. Their personal history may cover experiences of state regulation in which they felt the authoritarian pressure (e.g. in cases related to environmental issues and unfair employment network), their past witnesses of social events that showed an authoritarian threat (e.g. in cases related to police brutality), and their daily experience of online censoring in posting on Weibo. Many citizens’ participation online and offline in the *Southern Weekly* Incident clearly demonstrated the possibilities for past long-lasting emotions being powerfully re-generated in a public event. For activists, as I have discussed, their past suffering of serious injustice or unfairness that was still powerfully influencing their current lives continued to trigger their pursuit of activism. Understanding embodiment as being triggered by people’s past experiences, it is reasonable to anticipate the forming of latent networks (Melucci, 1996a) and participants’ further action. As citizens Hui and Kai both explained, acting in the *Southern Weekly* Incident made them recognise the passion deep inside them to take on street actions. Understanding activists’ long-term commitment to activism and some citizens’ transition to joining further democratic activities after the *Southern Weekly* Incident needs to take into account these latent effects of embodiment.
Emotions of all kinds contribute to the contingency of embodiment and action, but they are often abstract, situated, and may not directly linked to the contested issue. For example, a senior commentator of *Southern Metropolis Daily* confessed that his emotions reached a climax when he heard that Huang Can, the Chief Editor of *Southern Weekly* was the person who seized the Weibo account and posted the untrue information. He felt extremely hurt and disappointed since he knew Huang and trusted him as a person of decency while at that point he felt what Huang did betrayed his personal trust.

In the next section, I would like to discuss the emotion of moral shame which was repeatedly reported by journalists in my interviews, and which arguably became a distinct mechanism that shaped the dynamics and atmosphere in the *Southern Weekly* Incident.

6.1.3. ‘It felt like being morally kidnapped…’

Despite being evidently emotional, many *Southern Weekly* employees’ apparently understated their emotions in my interviews. This has to be understood as a reflection of not only the authoritarian repression they suffered during the incident, but also of their ambivalent feeling during the incident. To be more precise, many journalists felt under moral pressure from the public (especially media counterparts) – ‘being morally kidnapped by the public’ in their own words – to express their dissatisfaction with censorship and to make their Weibo accounts look supportive for their colleagues, while some of them might have otherwise preferred to be silent.

From my interview evidence, it is safe to say that Southern Media staff who were at the centre of the contention felt it much more risky to express resistance than people who were further from the centre (e.g. ordinary citizens). Journalists in the *Southern Weekly* Incident thus encountered a dilemma created by both repression of Chinese authorities and moral pressure from the public. On the one hand, the risks of action were increasing when action was taken further. On the other hand, moral pressure from people’s expectations forced the journalists to act more and the cost of dropping out also increased. This dilemma became part of the mechanism that facilitated action of some *Southern Weekly* staff in this particular case. As a Southern Media journalist explained,

‘When people saw that your Weibo profile was officially verified as Southern Media staff, they held expectations for you. If at that time you were still posting irrelevant or entertaining stuff on your Weibo account, there would be people blaming you for not caring about the *Southern Weekly* Incident. When most of your colleagues whom you followed on Weibo were all talking about this incident, you felt the pressure of saying something. It felt like being morally kidnapped. Although I had actual anger about the censoring of the New Year Edition, I was somehow morally forced to post some very emotional messages during the few days. I deleted some afterwards.’

When the co-signing of open letters was organised, this pressure was felt strongly. As another Southern Media journalist elaborated,
‘Although they emphasised that it was a voluntary choice of signing or not, you somehow felt the pressure that you just had to do the same as everybody else did, because they expected your name to be there and the list of the names would be shown online that everybody could see it.’

Indeed, many accounts provided by my interviewees who were not Southern Media employees were helpful for me to understand Southern Media employees’ moral pressure. In those accounts, the disappointment and condemnation of *Southern Weekly* staff not making a powerful act to promote the confrontation were clearly expressed. To take one example from one journalist working for a magazine based in Beijing,

‘Their [Southern Weekly staff’s] response to the case was first, lagging behind; second, very weak. Although it was true that some of them couldn’t speak online as their accounts were closed down, they gave people an impression of hesitating from the beginning and they somehow did not live up to other journalists’ expectation.’

Criticising *Southern Weekly* employees’ non-participation in the protest, a Southern Media journalist said,

‘They [some journalists] were both sophisticated and casual in this case. They were smart and sophisticated in the way that they calculated their losses and gains very carefully. They were very casual in maintaining personal values. They don’t care about values of work and of life. They are just snobbish people who are self-interested. They came out to have a shout in the case and then left, leaving other emotional people to fight to take the risks and they did not care about them anymore. You cannot expect these people to really do a thing.’

Similar disappointment was expressed by a former *Southern Weekly* journalist as such,

‘Although we, people who have left *Southern Weekly*, decided to take the risks and responsibility by speaking for them, we had to admit that we felt frustrated at some point because they [current *Southern Weekly* staff] responded so little. We were sad for their suffering but also angry with their non-resistance. After all they were the people who could make the thing grow and we could not meddle in their affairs. We felt disappointed but we had nothing to say. Gradually, some of us gave up and left the WeChat group where we discussed strategies for progressing the case.’

With the case further developing and more and more people getting involved, the pressure to act was increasingly put on *Southern Weekly* staff. A senior editor of *Southern Weekly* recalled that
many Southern Weekly staff felt guilty that they were not able to give ordinary citizens who were drawn into the protest a pledge, and this became ‘a big factor for consideration of action’. Simon (English name given by the interviewee), a journalist in Southern Media group and one of the authors of the open letter addressed to Southern Media staff, recalled his emotion when he finally saw Southern Weekly staff co-sign a statement after the Weibo account of Southern Weekly was seized,

‘The point when I was most excited during the incident was when they [Southern Weekly staff] co-signed their names after their official Weibo account was seized. We had been waiting for them to do some real things. However much we had done, we were just the surrounding people who played the role of passing by, but they [Southern Weekly staff] were the key players. They initiated the case, but if they didn’t continue acting strongly, we could not progress the case and we felt we were fooled. When I saw their names, one by one, row by row, listed in the statement posted online, I thought, they were finally forced out and now it looks a bit more like how things should be. I felt very excited and at that point I forgave their previous cowardliness.’

It can be seen that the Internet, by setting up a public platform, caused difficulty for journalists to hide themselves when they were in the public spotlight. Even simply being quiet became a challenge for some Southern Media employees. This was because the openness of the Internet to some extent made those journalists more visible, or at least easier to access in the form of online accounts. Concerned with being intensively watched during the Southern Weekly Incident, Southern Media employees felt that the public expected them to take responsibility for the event. This expectation was felt because they were labelled by the particular identity of a member of Southern Media team. The phrase which Simon used – they were ‘forced out’ – provided an apt expression of the tension. For a sustainable period of time during the incident, many journalists felt the pressure of expectation, being monitored, being waited for, and finally being ‘forced out’.

Moral pressure in collective action certainly exists in traditional offline movements, working through intimate ties which raise ‘the costs of dropping out’ thus sustaining participation (Goodwin and Pfaff, 2001, p.288). However, the Internet to some extent opens up another channel through which the public pressure can be efficiently enforced. The pressure forcefully ‘uploaded’ to the Internet seemed to become extremely frustrating for some journalists in the Southern Weekly Incident. As one member of the Southern Media staff felt during the case,

‘Once you light the fire, the fire will not be under your control, and you may end up burning yourself. Everybody online can say something even when they know very little about the issue. In most cases people cannot make the real issue clear in a 140-character Weibo post, and they don’t have the obligation to make it clear. The power of the public may become your pressure, and hurt you in the end.’
It is important to take this moral pressure into consideration as part of the mechanisms promoting action in the Southern Weekly Incident. The moral pressure may not necessarily lead to people’s action, but similar to other potential causal factors, it was part of people’s internal force and was taken into account in the calculation of costs and benefits by many journalists and citizens involved.

In general, people involved in online or offline action in the Southern Weekly Incident were enraged, irritated, or morally forced to pursue various forms of expressions, either verbal or physical, online or offline. They were mobilised by their past experiences in which emotions were generated and accumulated. They experienced embodiment in action which facilitated a process of encountering the self. Certainly, people’s calculation of gains and losses in the high-risk environment of protesting in China to a great extent hindered their street action or led to mild defiance (e.g. by-standing in the protest, online reposting) rather than radical protest. Yet public moral pressure and expectation may change the gain-loss calculation and push the limit of action.

Clearly, the mechanisms of action in the Southern Weekly Incident, including embodiment and various types of emotions such as excitement, outrage, irritation, impulse, and moral shame, were effectively facilitated by people sharing their opinions and experiences through a digital network. The logic of connective action, which characterises contemporary collective action and in which people are connected by providing personalised political expressions through communication technologies (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), was the context in which embodiment and emotions were promoted in the Southern Weekly Incident. People’s expressions in the framework of connective action were personalised, relatively free and flexible, but connected with the network as a whole. The possibility of this connectiveness rested on the inclusiveness of the massive digitalised network. Specifically, the network was inclusive to accommodate diverse appeals which were tremendously varied between journalists, citizens, activists, and others. Inclusiveness of the network also made other forms of collective forces possible, including public shaming as a mechanism to promote action. With diverse appeals and forces being included and connected to become a collective force, a distinct framework of connective action was established in the Southern Weekly Incident. I would like to address this framework in the next section.

6.2. A framework of connective action based on diverse appeals and personalised expressions

Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) discussion of the logic of connective action emphasises the structural fragmentation and individualisation of contemporary collective action, and identifies personalised ideas and personal communication technologies as the two basic elements that allow inclusiveness and enable people’s sharing ability in collective action. The following statements made by different groups of people involved in the Southern Weekly Incident, addressing different appeals, provided a brief demonstration of this framework of connective action.
'... Southern Weekly Editorial Department demands a thorough investigation of this publication accident which violated the normal publication procedure and made serious mistakes ...' – statement made by Southern Weekly staff on January 3

'... According to Provisional rules relating to the resignation of Party and government cadres, Minister Tuo should not be holding the post any more. Superior departments should request he takes the blame and resign and make public apologies ...' – statement made by journalists in Southern Media Group on 4 January (the same sentences appeared in the statement made by former Southern Weekly staff)

'... Hope the government opens up free speech, in order to allow the people to voice their problems and propose advice to the government...' – statement made to support Southern Weekly by some journalism students in universities on 7 January

Noticeably, fighting against censorship was not a consensus appeal as may be expected in the Southern Weekly Incident. While journalism students and ordinary citizens demanded press freedom and democracy, journalists who were seen as the victims of censorship did not directly challenge the long existing issue of news censorship in China. Instead, they simply demanded the adjustment of regulation implementation in news censoring. Division also existed between journalists inside and outside Southern Weekly. Specifically, former Southern Weekly staff and journalists who were from Southern Media but outside Southern Weekly requested the resignation of the provincial propaganda minister, while Southern Weekly staff did not publicly express their willingness to challenge either censorship or the post of the minister, but emphasised their focus on the 'publication accident'.

Explaining the relatively mild demand, a few journalists responded with self-mockery that journalists were like ‘frogs boiled in warm water’, meaning that they had lost the sense of fighting after being regulated for a long time by the Party. Some journalists confessed that directly pointing to censorship as a whole was ‘too political and risky’, and some emphasised that ‘it is impossible and pointless to challenge the whole system’. As a journalist said,

‘You work with this system every day. You know how powerful it is and how cruel they [the Party] could be so it is naive to talk about such a big issue. Even those who just wanted Tuo to step down were unrealistic. If they [the Party] really removed him then they made themselves look too weak.’

38 Journalists’ self-censoring should also be taken into account in examining their online presentations. As a senior editor of Southern Media confessed, ‘honestly I think it was about press freedom, but I just would not say it.’
Journalists obviously had to make difficult decisions about pursuing action in such a politically sensitive case. Conflicts also were shown between journalist groups in opinions on whether or not to proceed and how far action should go. Depending on how far they were from the centre of the contention, journalists held different evaluations of the risks involved in participating action in the incident. The further they were, the safer they felt, and the more likely they were to express political appeals. Some journalists confessed that during the case they urged Southern Weekly staff to resign. As one journalist from Southern Metropolis Daily expresses, ‘if they resigned, we would definitely join in [the resignation] too. But they disappointed us.’ A journalist witnessed discussions about Southern Weekly Incident within both a WeChat group of former Southern Weekly staff and the one of current Southern Weekly staff. He revealed,

‘Some of those former staff, though they were relatively older, were really excited and passionate, showing the revolutionary type of spirits to fight. They suggested Southern Weekly staff initiate a real strike and make a big noise internationally. They forcefully warned that if the newspaper of next week was still published, then the newspaper was done. But it was clear from the discussion of the current staff that they did not think about a real strike at all.’

Internally within Southern Weekly, staff were devoted to negotiating the adjustment of the way their newspaper was censored, in particular rejecting the process of pre-censoring. As frankly emphasised by a senior editor of Southern Weekly who played an important role in the Southern Weekly Ethical Communities (which was established for investigating the Southern Weekly Incident), they ‘only wanted to go back to the same censoring circumstance before Tuo took post’.

While some Southern Weekly staff emphasised that they were passive actors simply being irritated during the incident, some also clarified in my interviews that their online action was not inspired by the idea of confronting censorship, but for resisting an unprofessional presentation enforced on their journalistic work. As they explained, ‘the most irritating thought’ for them was that their ‘professionalism of editing the newspaper was being challenged’. The first open letter from Southern Weekly was posted after the online discussion was initiated about a few mistakes found on the New Year Edition and they felt insulted by ‘the enforced unprofessionalism’. The co-signing of the statement within Southern Weekly after their official Weibo account being seized was also a response of feeling ashamed that they had to take the blame for the editing mistakes which violated their pursuit of high-quality production of the newspaper. As one senior editor explained, ‘reputation is everything for this newspaper. Those stupid mistakes were really damaging the reputation of the newspaper and we cannot accept that’.

Similarly emphasising professionalism, Cheng, a Southern Weekly journalist commented that internal anger towards the Chief Editor Huang Can had been gradually increasing over years with ‘Huang’s frequent cutting and changing details of news stories’, which resulted in ‘twisted facts’, and this had challenged their journalism professionalism. Journalists’ perception of
professionalism and maintaining the high-quality editing of the newspaper should be taken into consideration when understanding many journalists’ relatively mild appeal, compared to citizens’. The different approaches to the incident between journalists inside and outside Southern Weekly were explained by my interviewees from both sides. The following arguments were provided respectively by Cheng, a Southern Weekly journalist, Ann, a journalist of Southern People Weekly, and Simon, a Southern Media journalist who organised the co-signing for the open letter addressing to Southern Media staff.

‘From beginning to end, I believed that we should solve the problems within the system rather than challenging the system. There had never been examples showing the possibility of breaking the Party regulation of media, so the best would be that we respect it, and strive for a better survival within it. I might feel some frustration in the early years of my career, but it was not long before I came to understand the reality of working in media in China. I have known that there is no point in resisting news censoring. If you cannot do your report in this way then you change the way you do it [bypassing the censoring]. If you cannot do the reports you want to do in this media then change your employer. If you cannot find a good one in this city then change another city. If you still cannot work, then change your career and leave media. As long as you stay in media you should just work within and around the rules. There are still so many valuable stories for me to write within the space I am given. Why do I waste time pursuing pointless confrontation? What we want is not a street movement, but the survival of this newspaper which can still provide us much room for doing journalism. Our specific appeal was that the minister and the Chief Editor should stop censoring the newspaper in such an extreme way. Not long after the incident ended, the Chief Editor was replaced. I am satisfied with the outcome.’ – Cheng, a journalist of Southern Weekly

‘They said they were looking at the bigger picture of the newspaper. What was the bigger picture? Would the survival of the newspaper ensure a bigger picture? Or was it that a bigger picture meant that they should protect the meanings and values which this newspaper had long been representing? They were just hiding and did not want to take any responsibility.’ – Ann, a journalist of Southern People Weekly

‘Many respectable staff in Southern Media also suggested that holding the ground should be the priority. This was a very out-dated idea. They did not know that if Southern Weekly staff did not act strongly then the credibility of the newspaper would be consumed. Using the power of the Internet, we could have developed the Southern Weekly Incident into a social movement. This is how social movements happen in the digital age in many countries. But those
people were cowardly. They were not only morally flawed for not being responsible for the brotherhood with outside journalists. They were also, and more seriously, politically immature for insisting on holding the ground.’ – Simon, a journalist of Southern Media

Each journalist had to make careful decisions under the sensitive circumstance. This was so even within the Southern Weekly team who made relatively consistent appeals to negotiate a looser approach to censoring. As one Southern Weekly staff member confessed, he was surprised and extremely disappointed to see some of his colleagues changed their approach to the case all of a sudden, for example, a dramatic withdrawal from any further online action.

On the side of citizens who were active online in sharing information about the Southern Weekly Incident, their emotions were loaded with personalised desires which, in the chemistry of the ideological discussion of press freedom and newspaper censorship, were transformed to ideological demands of democratising and liberating China. Compared to journalists’ direct experience with censorship at work, citizens’ broader and more abstract feeling about the issues involved triggered them to take on more idealist approaches and protested against censorship. Some journalists claimed that many citizens were not readers of the newspaper and they did not care about the facts of the incident itself. It is fair to say that Citizens identified themselves with the newspaper, by following their own interpretation of the newspaper and the incident. Through personalised expressions of their own emotions and experiences, they collectively demanded social justice and democracy. Conflicting political ideas clearly existed among different groups of activists, as I have discussed, but did not hinder their collective participation in online and offline action in the Southern Weekly Incident.

Some journalists stressed that democracy and press freedom ‘were excellent issues to protest for’ and the Southern Weekly Incident became ‘a good opportunity for many people with various personal needs to input expression and release emotions’. To many citizens, their approach was based on their perception of Southern Weekly as ‘a liberal and leftist newspaper’, as they repeatedly stated in my interviews. Perhaps the contrast of appeals between Southern Weekly employees and citizens had to be understood from their different perceptions of the newspaper itself. Citizens’ recognition of the liberalism and leftism of the newspaper was not agreed by the newspaper staff themselves who emphasised that the newspaper was ‘a very modest newspaper’. Some senior staff of Southern Weekly suggested that very few people who have a fondness of Southern Weekly really understand Southern Weekly.

Views provided by people outside Southern Media may be helpful to understand this public perception of the newspaper. A journalist working for Beijing News argued,

‘Southern Media is essentially a very ideological place in history. They are used to ridiculing the authorities. Although this time they may not have the
democratic demand, challenging the authorities has become their style and habit which they may not even want to admit.’

The complexity of how contrasting opinions about the newspaper were shaped in the historical context in China needs to be understood from the evolution of the media system in China. I discuss this history in Chapter 7. Here I would like to point out that the peculiar Chinese political regulation of media had shaped a media culture that was detached from public understandings. This had a profound impact on the different approaches taken by journalists and citizens in the Southern Weekly Incident. As a senior editor of Southern Weekly explained,

‘We consciously did not want to have much connection with the outside people. Their appeals were very diverse. Ours were also very different from theirs. I don’t think people needed to impose their opinions on other people. Some people even wanted to sacrifice the newspaper to pursue more fundamental change. This was very selfish. We did not need this consistency with them, but I don’t think we needed to draw a line between us and the outsiders either. The different goals and approaches did not prevent us from all having an independent say about the case.’

Everybody having a say was a key feature of the framework of connective action in the Southern Weekly Incident. The value of a particular view may not be the contribution of the view per se, but the force it created and generated that was constantly strengthening a collective force through the network. People reposted other people’s posts for sharing, without necessarily showing support for the views. The following post from a citizen said it,

@ Kao Er La GZ (7 January, at 02:09)
‘The power has closed all the ways out. So all the voices of people motivated by whatever reasons are precious’

This view is in accordance with interviewees’ opinions on the authenticity of Weibo information. As a journalist explained,

‘Sometimes the Internet really changes the original story beyond recognition. People did not really care about the facts. But the Internet often showed the capacity to allow the truth to surface at the end, in the way that so much information was generated and people argued about it. Gradually people were pushed closer to the essential information and the truth.’

Though in such a framework of connective action, various voices from journalists and citizens with diverse appeals sometimes appeared to be chaotic in the Southern Weekly Incident, it was demonstrated that different voices were accommodated and coordinated on the Internet and in general were shaped into a seemingly coherent force confronting the authorities. Echoes are the
mediators that coordinate various voices. As a Southern Media employee observed, ‘Between journalists and citizens, there was an echo of social value. This echo enhanced journalists’ emotions and strengthened their courage to speak out more bravely.’

It is fair to say that only in the logic of connective action could the Southern Weekly Incident have developed to be a confrontational challenge to the authorities. Appeals of different groups and individuals in this case were impossible to reconcile which is true of most cases in contemporary China—so conventional collective action could not find its soil. As suggested by the following conversation on Weibo on 7 January after the official Southern Weekly Weibo account was seized,

@ Chai Chun Ya:
Call for media workers all over the country to strike together. If Southern Weekly failed this time, it would be the shame of all the journalists in China. You may forever lose freedom and dignity because of your weakness today. You don’t try to get rid of the chain, then the chain will be always there.

@zoooooooooo:
If a strike occurs, the appeal should be clear: abolish news censorship. Do not just replace a few people [official censors] and then everything goes back to normal. Only under this flag [of abolishing news censorship] that the unity of the whole field [all the journalists] would be possible.

Evidently, a national journalists’ strike did not emerge, but the Internet successfully mediated the different appeals online and framed them into the coordinated force confronting the authorities. In this force, each voice from every individual is meaningful.

In the logic of connective action, people co-produced and co-distributed personally expressive content in the way that the diverse personalised expressions are shared and mutually shaped through the media network (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). The Southern Weekly Incident demonstrated a certain level of cultural understanding among people that was important in facilitating the co-production of expressive content and the echoes between citizens and journalists as a whole. For example, the common strategies adopted by Weibo users and the creative and artful presentations of online posting were based on a consensus of Internet use in China. The relay of posts formed by Weibo users was pursued implicitly in a self-organised fashion. Some citizens showed understanding of journalists’ absence in the protest and this understanding in some way allowed the continuum of development of online and offline expressions. As Yan, the lecturer who took and posted many photos of the protest recalled,

‘None of my friends nor myself demanded Southern Weekly journalists respond to our support. That kind of demand would be too excessive and unreasonable. Those journalists needed to keep their jobs, just like we all
needed to assess the risks and make our own decision. As long as they showed some level of defence of speech freedom, that’s enough.’

Many Southern Media employees pointed out that the nature of the Southern Weekly Incident was originally far from demanding democracy, and was more an internal negotiation of operating the news editing of the newspaper, but this nature was transformed by the public on the Internet. As one journalist explained, ‘it was the people online that somehow forced a more fundamental issue of press freedom to this case. Then when the online voice was pushed to that level, Southern Weekly staff had no way back.’

In summary, the issue in the centre of the Southern Weekly Incident was somewhat framed flexibly by different groups of people through their personalised expressions. The flexibility of online expressions allowed people to establish identities based on their emotions generated from their past experiences. Participation in this sense was self-motivated. Different groups were somewhat detached from each other in the logic of connective action. Taking digital media as organising agents, people co-produced and co-distributed personally expressive content and echoes between different expressions were formed. The network itself became an organisational structure and the action became a personal expression. Through the framework of connective action based on diverse appeals and personalised expressions, the momentum of action was continually enhanced and collective action was formed and sustained.

Various opinions accommodated by a connective framework also implied the co-existence of various approaches in the Southern Weekly Incident. In the final section of this chapter, I will summarise the online and offline action as a whole in the Southern Weekly Incident as a peculiar form of segmented action.

6.3. The form of action: online and offline segments directed by different groups

The action online and offline in the Southern Weekly Incident appeared to be segmented in the way that the online and offline stages were mainly promoted by different groups of people. Specifically, in the earlier stage, the journalists of Southern Media initiated online discussion about the modification incident of the New Year Edition and together with the public, they carried out a series of online actions. While the journalists restricted their action to mainly online, some citizens with various motivations moved from online to offline to pursue street protest at the later stage. Although journalists did not organise citizens’ action, their discussion about the incident provided the issue that mobilised citizens to take action both online and offline. The offline protest was constantly broadcast on Weibo to echo online voices thus enhancing the collective force confronting the authorities.

The segmentation of action was understood by a senior editor of Southern People Weekly as such,
‘The journalists had done their part in helping the case ferment online, then it was other people’s turn to continue promoting it. Why would we put ourselves in trouble by mixing together with them? It is non-organised and non-planned. I believe that the whole society in this kind of case had an automatic mechanism to balance action. Nobody needed to lead the way.’

It is fair to say that on the side of the journalists, especially for Southern Weekly staff, claiming a divorce with street protest was a way of protecting themselves from serious political charge, as we can see from the below expression from a representative of Southern Weekly staff, who was appointed by colleagues to represent Southern Weekly staff in the internal investigation meeting:

‘Viewing the whole progress of the Southern Weekly Incident as a social event, the role played by Southern Weekly staff was minimal. We only provided a blasting fuse for the case. Some of the Southern Weekly staff were only drawn into it without intention. Many people in Southern Media wanted the incident to end as soon as possible. We did not want it to develop to such a scale but it was out of control. There were apparently many social tensions and conflicts existing in Chinese society. For many years after 1989 there has never been a platform in Chinese society for these tension and conflicts to be publicly presented. Now the Internet provides this platform. The action could just go on without being attached to Southern Weekly.’

For some protesters, especially activists who intended to initiate a civil action and saw civil mobilisation as the purpose of action, as long as the action was mobilised and a certain level of influence in the public and the authorities was formed, the absence of the journalists was immaterial and the segmentation actually allowed the sustainability and the efficiency of the action. The Southern Weekly Incident indeed gained much room to evolve from this segmentation of action subjects, in the way that both journalists and protestors felt somewhat free from the accusation of leading, planning, or organising the development of the incident. Certainly, predicting how the authorities would portray the incident and punish the people involved still created huge tension in the case.

The segmented form of online/offline action in the Southern Weekly Incident however did not mean that online and offline actions were disconnected. This form of segmentation without disconnection was also accomplished through the cohesiveness of the Internet. While people online may not pursue offline action, the issues they presented online mobilised other groups of people to take street action.

In general, the online/offline seemingly segmented form of collective action in the Southern Weekly Incident is meaningful for exploration, in that it is distinct from radical social movements in the 1970s and 1980s, and from Chinese online activism flourishing since the late 1990s. Exploring online and offline action in the Southern Weekly Incident is of universal significance to
the study of collective action in the current China, in particular through asking questions such as what made it happen, how did it happen?, and what hindered its happening. The current political restriction of protesting collectively in China implies that the assessment of risk in participating online and offline action is a great determinant factor for taking action, and thus action is only possible when it is personalised in various forms. The study of the mechanisms, framework and form of action in the Southern Weekly Incident shows that through a flexible form of social connection in digital age, various approaches of action from mild to radical levels co-existed in the Southern Weekly Incident. Chinese people during the incident took action online and offline, following physical and vocal forms, expressing various appeals and personalised ideas. Facilitated by the inclusiveness of the Internet, action presented a powerful collective force calling for political change.

I would like to complete the study of the Southern Weekly Incident in the next chapter by closely examining the interplay between Chinese politics, media ecology, and ideologies in the incident.
Chapter 7 The *Southern Weekly* Incident and collective action in the Chinese context

My literature review of Chinese Internet studies in Chapter 2 shows that the interplay between the powers of politics, market, technologies, and civil society is a key mechanism of technological empowerment of the Internet in China, as it influences various aspects of Chinese society that have been explored by scholars from multiple disciplines (Zheng and Wu, 2005; Zhou, 2006; Yu, 2006; Zhao, 2008; Yang, 2009; King et al., 2013; Qian, 2014). A distinct feature of the *Southern Weekly* Incident is its nature of being a media confrontation which meant that media themselves became the subjects taking civil action. The role of media in this incident departed from what it had been in other cases of collective action, namely, as an external power for providing reports, usually speaking for both the authorities and the civil society. The role of media in this case was as a civil actor and the repression of media triggered the confrontation from civil society. Therefore, political control on media, which usually endeavours to utilise media to represent authoritarian rulings, however, became the direct repression of a civil power in this case. While the Internet provided abundant information which greatly mobilised people’s emotions and embodiment, politics imposed risks which directly hindered many people’s action. Political power in this incident is also, essentially, concerned with its long-term shaping of a peculiar media culture in the evolution of the Chinese media system.

This chapter investigates journalists and citizens’ negotiation with the authorities and the self, in order to examine how specific political conditions, media culture, and social ideologies shaped the *Southern Weekly* Incident through both authoritarian control and people’s self-restriction. In this way, it accelerates the examination of the mechanisms, framework and form of action in the complex Chinese context. At the end I also discuss the testimony episode in the *Southern Weekly* Incident to address the complexity of collective action in the Chinese context.

7.1. **Negotiation with the authorities**

Politics was the superior concern for most people in the *Southern Weekly* Incident. Political restriction for the people involved was first of all, a determining factor for people’s action. The questions of ‘how will the authorities portray the nature of the case?’ and ‘how will the authorities punish the people involved?’ were of concern to people thinking about taking online and offline action. Questions of this type were continually being discussed among journalists and used as the basis for negotiation between other journalists, senior staff of Southern Media, and the propaganda officials. Secondly, Party control of the media had for a long time shaped a peculiar institutional profile of media that had a significant impact orienting media workers’ approaches in the *Southern Weekly* Incident.

In the following two sections, I investigate the negotiation between journalists and the authorities taking place in the background during the *Southern Weekly* Incident to examine how the authoritarian power restricted journalists’ confrontation. This part is a retelling of journalists’ action
in the *Southern Weekly* Incident from an internal angle. It is worth noting here that this internal record is based on the accounts of journalists, and I could not hope to have reached the authorities, who should have provided key accounts. I then investigate the institutional profile of *Southern Weekly* in the context of political control in order to understand the institutional restriction in action.

### 7.1.1. What is the truth? What shall we do? What do we want?

The intensive backroom conversations taking place in formal and informal meetings, WeChat group chats, and in-person communications focused on two dimensions. The first dimension was around the questions of what happened to the New Year Edition and how. This dimension directed the investigation of the incident and it was important for *Southern Weekly* staff’s self-defence in front of both the authorities and the public, and provided the evidence of *Southern Weekly*’s negotiation with the authorities. The second dimension was around concern about how the authorities may portray the case and people’s behaviour, and how they will punish the people involved. This dimension directly determined journalists’ action strategies, and to a greater extent, influenced their attitude and passion in action. In general, these two dimensions of discussion guided *Southern Weekly* staff’s careful consideration which resulted in the particular demands they made. In this section, I follow *Southern Weekly*’s internal negotiations and discussions to retell the development of the *Southern Weekly* Incident.

The Chief Editor of *Southern Weekly* Huang Can and a deputy Chief Editor Wu Xiaofeng were the key people who experienced the final modification of the New Year Edition. With the urgency of investigating the truth about the modification increasing, the demands for their accountability quickly grew.

Huang Can, who was removed from the post of Chief Editor after the *Southern Weekly* Incident, obviously attracted huge controversy during the incident. The Provincial Propaganda Minister Tuo Zhen was the direct target attacked by most journalists in Southern Media after the modification was revealed online, whilst Huang Can was another target for attack by *Southern Weekly* staff, and gradually became the prime target as the incident progressed. Huang Can was appointed to take charge of *Southern Weekly* in 2011. As Chief Editor, Huang, together with other senior officials of the newspaper, conducted routine censoring before the newspaper was submitted to the senior staff of Southern Media and then to the Provincial Propaganda Department (as exceptions, some issues might be directly published after Huang’s censoring). After one and a half years being the Chief Editor, Huang was well known for his brutal style of censoring articles and regulating journalists’ reports. As Jian, a senior editor of *Southern Weekly* reveals, Huang killed more than 70 percent of the articles they produced. Jian explained,

‘Huang Can was not an editor with whom you could communicate. He killed many articles without explaining why. When the Chief Editor conducts censoring either before the articles were published or before they were submitted to be censored by the above, we needed the Chief Editor’s
professional explanation of his censoring, in particular what were the risks of publishing the particular article and what was the evidence for the judgement. He was never able to provide that. We often found us speaking a foreign tongue to him when we were discussing professional matters. Once we did a series of political reports on Myanmar. We were already very careful with ensuring the balanced reports on different parties, the left, the right, and the centrist, but Huang insisted "to follow his instinct", only allowing one part of the reports to be published. The published reports turned out to be criticised by the above. In my experience I knew that the key to international reports was that they should be very balanced. The ridiculous thing was that after being criticised Huang finally concluded that we should not have published anything about that topic. Why do we need you [pointing to Huang] if we were not going to publish anything. Another time we did a report that had the potential to be very influential. He killed the topic. Other media did it and it was praised by the Central Propaganda Department. Neither your professional ability could earn our trust, nor could your political judgement in many cases. Why do we want you to be the Chief Editor?"

A Southern Weekly journalist in the Beijing station also revealed,

‘Huang Can censored articles in a way that really annoyed us. He censored the articles sentence by sentence and word by word, rather than conducting a general control. He often deleted the parts of a sentence that he felt it was politically negative and kept the rest of it. In this way, he twisted the meaning. He also did very brutal change of article titles which had made us so uncomfortable'.

Despite suffering from Huang’s censoring for one and a half years, Southern Weekly staff did not challenge his position at the beginning of the incident. As Jian explained, ‘we all had the common sense that even if another Chief Editor was appointed to replace Huang, not much would be changed anyway. At least we had been working with him for such a long time and we knew the way to work with him. Tuo-style-regulation, as we like to call it, was the chief culprit'.

On 3 January after the information that the New Year Edition had been modified had spread online for more than a day, Huang Can and Wang Genghui, who was one of the senior officials of Southern Media taking charge of Southern Weekly, called for a New Year dinner with Southern Weekly staff. Being suspicious of the purpose of the meal and concerned with the pressure which might be put on them by Huang and Wang during the meal, Southern Weekly staff posted online, just before the meal, the first open letter verifying that the New Year Edition was modified after it was finalised.
Apparently, it was a very tricky game to play for both the Chief Editor and other staff at the newspaper. At this early stage, everybody seemed to be extremely cautious of initiating a tit-for-tat fight, and both sides played it subtly. Huang and Wang were apparently trying to settle the incident and prevent radical action of the staff, while the staff were trying to get a signal from the leaders about how they might be punished but at the same time staying firm to show that they could take radical action and that they held huge support from the public. As recalled by a few editors who attended the so-called New Year meal, Huang and Wang avoided directly talking about the *Southern Weekly* Incident during the meal. They did not respond to other editors’ probing about the incident. Instead, they portrayed a positive future of the newspaper. Apparently, Huang’s portrayal of a promising prospect did not calm down *Southern Weekly* staff, nor did the staff get sufficient information to decide their further action. At the same time, information from outside sources suggested that the phrase first posted on Weibo – ‘The New Year Edition was modified by Tuo’ might be problematic and might cause these journalists huge trouble for spreading misinformation. This central question needed to be answered urgently – Who modified the New Year Edition?

As revealed by Guan (2014) who interviewed Wu Wei, the manager of *Southern Weekly*’s official Weibo account, to investigate the *Southern Weekly* Incident, Huang Can made two calls to Wu Wei shortly after the information of the modification was disseminated, emphasising that the New Year Edition was not modified by Minister Tuo, and the leading paragraph containing a number of errors was drafted by the deputy Chief Editor of *Southern Weekly* Wu Xiaofeng. Huang Can and the deputy Chief Editor Wu Xiaofeng were gradually pushed into the spotlight.

On the night of 5 January, an investigation meeting attended by the editorial committee (composed of senior editors) and staff representatives sent from three correspondents’ stations of the newspaper was held to investigate the truth behind the modification. Huang Can and Wu Xiaofeng both attended the meeting. As revealed by a staff representative, Huang Can haltingly clarified that the article of New Year Greeting where literary mistakes were made was drafted by *Southern Weekly* staff and modified following the instructions from the Provincial Propaganda Department, and the leading paragraph was drafted by Wu Xiaofeng. He emphasised that Minister Tuo had nothing to do with the conduct of the modification. Following Huang Can, Wu Xiaofeng then released the information about what happened on 1 January after he and Huang were called to the office of the Provincial Propaganda Department where a propaganda officer pointed out some problems on the front page and instructed how the front page should be modified, in particular adding the leading paragraph. Wu confessed that he recorded the instructions and drafted the leading paragraph where he made some errors.

The information released in this meeting was key for *Southern Weekly* staff. It dampened some staff’s determination for action. It is fair to say that when the news about the modification of the New Year Edition was released, journalists’ long-term accumulation of emotions reached the tipping point and outrage was automatically attached to Minister Tuo, though many journalists did...
not know about Tuo in person. This, it turned out, was an attachment without certainty. After the modification details became clearer and it was revealed that Wu drafted the article text, journalists were halted by concerns that they may be charged for spreading misinformation about Tuo’s modification, although there was obviously the pressure and specific instructions from the Provincial Propaganda Department behind the modification. As the senior editor Jian revealed,

‘When your attack target was Tuo but the core fact about his modification was not even existing, how could you stand up?’

[Regardless of who conducted the modification, many people understood that journalists’ accusation of Tuo was actually about the censoring pressure he and the Provincial Propaganda Department put on *Southern Weekly*] – said by the interviewer.

‘Yes. To media people this might be a common sense. But when the journalists first posted the information on Weibo, the written words apparently became serious accusation. Weibo is a strange place…. We all know that Weibo posting is a form of causal chatting, but it turned out that some very influential people in media circles really treated those posts as formal accusation. When people like Hu Shuli [a famous media leader in China] questioned the validity of the accusation, the posts became problematic. We could not ignore the fact that those posts created the image in some non-media people’s mind that Tuo modified the newspaper which was not true’.

As a staff representative who attended the investigation meeting recalled, more than 10 journalists and editors (not including Huang Can) went for a late night meal after they left the meeting. Though the meeting did not settle any solution, there was no mention of punishment of *Southern Weekly* staff. Journalists and editors at the meal therefore felt optimistic and hoped that not long later the discussion about the incident would die down and the incident could be finished. However, a text message sent by Huang Can to Wu Wei (the manager of *Southern Weekly* Weibo account) dramatically disturbed the atmosphere. The message showed Huang Can’s draft of a clarification which he commanded Wu Wei to post on *Southern Weekly*’s Weibo account. It showed an apology to readers sent on behalf of *Southern Weekly* clarifying that the New Year Edition was completely produced by *Southern Weekly* staff themselves, and *Southern Weekly* Editorial Department were accountable for the mistakes on the front page. Suddenly, all people at the meal were enraged and by the time close to midnight, almost all of them had sent messages to Huang Can stressing that posting that message would completely destroy *Southern Weekly*.

The intense confrontation continued the next day with fierce arguments taking place in Huang Can’s office. Finally on the evening of 6 January, Huang Can forced Wu Wei to hand over the password of the Weibo account. The Weibo account was seized and the clarification was posted to the public. At this point, Huang Can became the primary target of most *Southern Weekly* staff.
Southern Weekly staff quickly posted Weibo messages to defend the newspaper, claiming that their Weibo account was seized and the messages posted from that account did not represent the newspaper anymore. The staff in Guangzhou gathered in a hotel near the press to discuss their form of resistance. As I have outlined in the last chapter, there was a dramatic change in the atmosphere in the hotel rooms, after an editor encouraged to ‘fight through’ and ‘no resignation’. In the meantime, the deputy Chief Editor Wu Xiaofeng, who was also in the hotel room, was urged to draft a detailed report explaining the whole modification episode.

Wu Xiaofeng was another intriguing character in the Southern Weekly Incident. As a deputy Chief Editor, he was in the same boat as Huang Can, being accountable for the leading group of Southern Media and for the propaganda department. However, the message posted on Southern Weekly’s Weibo account, stating that all mistakes were made by Southern Weekly staff themselves, obviously enforced huge pressure on him to take all the blame. Apparently, the seizing of the Weibo account episode, in particular Huang’s posting of the clarification, for Wu seemed to be a betrayal of the institution which he had been working for. That night, he was standing at the side of those journalists in the hotel room.

In the Beijing station, journalists also gathered in their office to join in the relay of Weibo posting for defending the newspaper. As a Beijing journalist recalls,

‘When the challenge to Huang Can was initiated, we all joined in. Huang Can’s censoring was so unbearable. I heard about Tuo’s abnormal censoring, but he was too far from us, especially journalists in Beijing. We did not directly feel that’.

A statement co-signed by 97 staff, which declared that the post from the official account was untrue, was posted on Weibo at 11.04pm. This was the only time when Southern Weekly staff organised co-signing during the whole incident. Many Southern Weekly staff in my interviews described that this night as ‘when they were most united during the whole incident’. Given the unclear situation and huge concern before this episode, on this night almost all Southern Weekly staff targeted Huang Can to express anger.

Later, a report was posted by Southern Weekly staff members, revealing the two-day fighting between Southern Weekly staff and their Chief Editor Huang Can, which explained how the false message was posted. A few hours later, an investigative report, which reviewed in detail what happened during the whole month’s production of the New Year Edition including Wu Xiaofeng’s review of the modification after the newspaper being finalised, was posted.

It is worth noting that interestingly there was, between Southern Weekly staff and other people, an obvious split in the targets for attack. While Southern Weekly staff had already shifted their target to Huang Can, people online directed more anger towards Minister Tuo. As I have described earlier, on that night when Southern Weekly’s Weibo account was seized, the drama
of racing to post Weibo messages before they were deleted widely mobilised online citizens and directly triggered some citizens and activists to go to protest the next day. To most citizens, the power relation in the media system was simplified to be between *Southern Weekly* and ‘those above’, which, in this particular period, was tightly tied to Minister Tuo. Their attack target was censorship in general, and Minister Tuo in particular, for his brutality of modifying the newspaper and seizing the Weibo account. As many *Southern Weekly* staff revealed in my interviews, they would not try to explain to the public about the complex structure and multi-layered regulation within media, as ‘the public would not understand and would not bother trying to understand’.

At the same time, *Southern Weekly* staff also felt the need to restrict their online action in order to facilitate their negotiation with senior staff of Southern Media, as many *Southern Weekly* employees recalled. In addition, there was an explicit command from the company leaders prohibiting journalists from having contact with protesters and foreign press. In the Beijing correspondents’ station, journalists were advised by *Southern Weekly* Editorial Committee to not go to the office in order to avoid direct contact with citizens who went to the office building to support the newspaper. The *Southern Weekly* Editorial Committee explained that either journalists forming an alliance with supporters or journalists initiating a conflict with the citizens would hinder the ongoing negotiation with the leaders of the media. For them, the intention was to resolve some problems of management within a framework that did not challenge Party policies. However, it is fair to say that all parties, including the *Southern Weekly* staff, non-*Southern Weekly* staff in Southern Media, and outside citizens, came to the point of being determined to fight after the Weibo account was seized, despite the departure of the targets for attack. To this point, the outside voice was getting out of *Southern Weekly*’s control. As observed by a Southern media commentator,

> ‘The rapidly growing voice from people outside Southern Media echoed with many non-*Southern Weekly* staff’s emotion in Southern Media, and gave many Southern Media staff an illusion that they could speak louder and take more radical action. However, the non-*Southern Weekly* staff and outside citizens were all ignorant of the core facts in the modification incident’.

As a staff representative who was sent from a news bureau of *Southern Weekly* to join the internal negotiation in Guangzhou, Lu witnessed the negotiations within *Southern Weekly* and between *Southern Weekly* and the leading group of Southern Media. From the role he played being a staff representative during the case we may see the intention and targets of *Southern Weekly* staff in these negotiations.

As Lu recalled, he listened to the discussions in the internal meetings and the decisions made there, and delivered through WeChat group networks this message to the journalists in the news bureau where he was based, and at the same time he delivered the demands of his colleagues to the meetings, telling the people in the meetings how journalists in that bureau felt and reacted to their decisions. He was a listener and mediator. For example, there were times when he spoke
in the meetings about his colleagues getting extremely upset and emotional. Information like this urged the senior staff in the Southern Weekly Editorial Department meetings to take measures to calm down staff’s emotion. Besides conveying information, another goal of Lu’s job was to reassure all staff in order to ensure the whole team were taking consensus action (which included preventing disruptive action being taken by some people in the team) and allow the negotiation between the newspaper and the senior staff of Southern Media to unfold without being disrupted.

On 7 January, a meeting was held between Southern Weekly Editorial Committee and the leader of Southern Media Yang Jian to negotiate resolution to the incident. As Lu recalled, this meeting was of great significance, as Southern Weekly journalists planned to negotiate with Yang Jian for a fair and open rule of the Southern Weekly Incident, the removal of Huang Can, the abolishment of pre-censoring (so to return to post-censoring rule), and so forth. Some Southern Weekly staff were optimistic that the demand of removing the Chief Editor Huang Can might be met in this meeting, while some members of Southern Weekly Editorial Committee suggested the potential for not being able to get out of the meeting room, ‘such as that the leaders of Southern Media portrayed our people as reactionary force and immediately controlled them in the meeting’, as explained by Lu.

However, during the meeting, Southern Weekly journalists received multiple sources of information through WeChat network groups which suggested that the Global Times’ editorial on the morning of 7 January, entitled Southern Weekly’s ‘Message to Readers’ Is Food for Thought Indeed should be regarded as an official ruling on the incident. This implied that the newspaper was officially accused of colluding with foreign elements to divide China. Lu and other journalists, who did not attend the meeting with the leading group of Southern Media, gathered all information in WeChat groups, and then discussed and judged the authenticity of information. The disturbing information about the possible official judgement was quickly presented to Southern Weekly Editorial Committee, who were in the meeting, through a WeChat network group. Lu suggested that it was very important for Southern Weekly staff in the meeting to hold updated information of how the authorities would portray and rule the case, in order to adjust their negotiation direction and strategies. At the same time, Lu was responsible for calming down journalists who became too emotional and ‘uncontrollable’. As he explained, ‘if some journalists outside the meeting did something too radical, the meeting inside could not continue’. Increasingly, the information Lu and his colleagues gathered suggested that the portrayal of ‘foreign forces involved’ was settled by the central government. At around 5pm, journalists learned from their sources about the instruction planned by the authorities: commanding all media to reprint the Global Times editorial. All this information was quickly passed to the meeting.

The leading group of Southern Media, as a whole, played a distinct role in the Southern Weekly Incident. The leading group of Southern Media was led by Yang Jian, who used to be the deputy minister of Guangdong Provincial Propaganda Department and was appointed to be the Party secretary of Southern Media in May 2012. Yet, the leading group consisted of members from
mixed backgrounds. Within this group, there were the officers such as Yang Jian who were directly appointed to their particular senior jobs by governments and other senior editors who used to practise journalism in media (their positions also needed to be approved by the government). Working as the leaders of the media in general, these different people were together, on the one hand, accountable to their Party superiors including the provincial and central propaganda departments (and other superior institutions which regulate press and publication), responsible for regulating the publication of the media, and on the other hand, they were representing the interests of the media corporation and some of them had a deep connection with journalists and editors.

Fang was the Deputy Chief Editor of Southern Media and former Chief Editor of *Southern Weekly*. In her post of Chief Editor of *Southern Weekly* from 1996 to 2000, *Southern Weekly* gained its reputation of being a sharp critic of social corruption and injustice. She and her colleague drafted well-known New Year Greetings, including the widely remembered one (published in 1999) which involves famous sentences such as ‘empower the powerless, let the pessimists move forward’. In 2000, Fang was removed from *Southern Weekly* by the provincial propaganda department and then appointed to take charge of other newspapers in Southern Media. Fang has been well respected by *Southern Weekly* staff. She had a distinct role to play in the *Southern Weekly* Incident. As a senior editor of Southern Media, she was, together with other senior staff, responsible for settling the incident, whilst as a former leader of *Southern Weekly* and the veteran who established the newspaper’s values, she was expected by *Southern Weekly* staff to bring fairness and sympathy to the newspaper. When the anger was heavily directed at the Chief Editor of the newspaper Huang Can, many journalists demanded Fang’s return to lead the newspaper. As Fang recalled,

‘I understood those young people who wanted me back, but I knew it was impossible. Since 2008, *Southern Weekly* and *Southern Metropolis Daily* have been attached the label “Two South”. For ensuring the survival of *Southern Weekly* which has already assumed great sensitivity, they need to keep replacing the editors in charge … it is impossible for me to go back, but I have always been demanding those people who take charge of this newspaper to really understand the historical specificity of the newspaper and its team.’

Fang was trying to calm down *Southern Weekly* staff and promote the negotiation between the team of *Southern Weekly* and the senior staff of Southern Media. She recalled the meeting on 7 January. She was waiting outside the meeting room, listening to the conversation. Like journalists of *Southern Weekly*, she was hoping that the Chief Editor of the newspaper could be replaced and saw this potential result as a great achievement of the incident. However, as she revealed,

‘When they were still negotiating in the meeting and we were still feeling optimistic about the result, suddenly information from outside media counterparts came to Southern Media and suggested that the incident was
already ruled by the authorities as involving foreign forces. So the negotiation was forcefully ceased, and the discussion could only point to the central question of “how are you [the authorities] going to define this incident?” All of the previous negotiation of changing the internal management and replacing the Chief Editor was wasted, because the accusation of the newspaper colluding with foreign forces was much more a dominant concern.’

Like many journalists who exclaimed that ‘we never saw any foreign forces in the press’, Fang marvelled at the authorities’ decision to rule on the incident in this way. She sighed in my interview, ‘it was a huge and complex state apparatus assessing all the aspects of the incident from a political point of view. The explanation of such a decision of ruling the incident might not be revealed until a future point’.

On the night of 9 January when the drama of confronting Beijing Propaganda officers to resist reprinting the Global Times editorial unfolded in the office of Beijing News, Southern Weekly staff were extremely upset by the possible expansion of the confrontation, as Lu explained. He puts it, ‘We tried very hard to restrict the action to online only, preventing it from becoming a social movement. But the confrontation in Beijing News was out of our control. If Beijing News kept firmly resisting the propaganda officer’s command, the incident might be expanded to the level that we could not predict, and then all that we had done would be charged. This is the complexity…. We wanted the incident to be settled soon but other people kept escalating it’.

The negotiations within Southern Weekly and within Southern Media showed how the Party power, in particular the authoritarian ruling of the incident, dominated journalists’ concern and restricted their confrontation. In general, Southern Weekly staff endeavoured to avoid political punishment for initiating the Southern Weekly Incident. To ensure this, they spoke with one voice which emphasised the departure from challenging Party policies and the focus on internal management in media. They prevented disturbing action taken by staff which might create distraction and hinder their negotiation with the authorities. They divorced with protesters outside the press and were cautious of being related to any form of association within Southern Media or with external media. The form of negotiation showed how social media, in particular WeChat, helped facilitate backroom conversations when interaction with outside people was deliberately avoided and Weibo as a public domain became too exposed and sensitive. We can also identify a peculiar institutional structure of Southern Media, which played a crucial role in orienting journalists’ action strategies.

The interior structure of media institutions plays an essential role in facilitating a complex media apparatus which implements the Party’s media regulation. In the next section, I examine the
institutional profile of Southern Weekly under party control to explore how we may understand the internal negotiation within Southern Media from the angle of a distinct institutional culture.

7.1.2. The institutional profile of Southern Weekly under party control

Being established in 1984 and currently having an average circulation of more than 1.7 million all over China (which is the largest weekly circulation of any newspaper in mainland China), Southern Weekly is embraced by liberal intellectuals as the most outspoken newspaper in China. Some Western media have described Southern Weekly as China’s most influential liberal newspaper (e.g. The New York Times), though many current members of Southern Weekly rejected the value of liberalism attached to the newspaper, as I have pointed out in Chapter 6. As a Southern Weekly editor explained,

‘The liberalism and leftism of Southern Weekly are imposed by the outsiders. The labels of liberalism are forcefully entrusted to the newspaper. After so many years adjusting, Southern Weekly has become a middle ground and mixed-culture place. Being radical is not what a modest media such as Southern Weekly is like. Southern Weekly is actually a media of hybrid values. It is more conservative in politics, more liberal in economics, and maybe a bit liberal in culture, but in general it is a very modest newspaper, very much and necessarily follows the Party line, not that liberal’.

Yet readers’ understanding of the liberal struggle of Southern Weekly did not come out of nowhere. A few journalists, who denied the liberal value of the newspaper, ironically recalled in my interviews that Southern Weekly was where their journalism dream started, and where they felt the idealism of promoting liberty in China. Indeed, Southern Weekly claimed Justice, Conscience, Love, Rationality as its editorial guideline and from 2007 had adopted a publication purpose of Understanding China from here. Riding the spring breeze of China’s reform and opening-up policy in the 1980s, Southern Weekly evolved fast from a supplement of the Party-organ South Daily, focusing on culture and entertainment, to a national newspaper in its own right, focusing on serious and comprehensive coverage of politics, economy, and many social issues. By late 1980s, Southern Weekly had become well-known for playing the public supervisory role, being an advocate of the spirit of rule of law, and enlightening human spirits. Leaving aside the free will of the newspaper and Southern Media which publishes the newspaper, scholars and intellectuals have celebrated Southern Weekly’s contribution to public democratic debate and the forming of a civil society in China (Guan, 2014). A brief review of the evolving media ideology in China in a broader political context will be helpful for articulating the profile of Southern Weekly and the contradictory opinions on Southern Weekly.

Southern Weekly was established in Deng Xiaoping’s governing age (Deng’s governing age normally refers to the period covering the late 1970s towards the late 1980s), in which interaction between politics and news media was unprecedented (Qian, 2014). Qian Gang, a former
executive deputy Chief Editor of *Southern Weekly* and currently a scholar, claims that in Mao’s age (Mao Zedong’s age normally refers to the period beginning with the establishment of People’s Republic of China in October 1949 until the 1970s), political power had absolute control over news media. The Great Cultural Revolution fundamentally damaged journalism in China. Until the 1970s, newspapers in China had declined significantly both in number and function. All the newspapers in China appeared to be the same - all were Mao’s mouthpiece (Qian, 2014). With Deng’s promotion of a market economy, media started to recover (Qian, 2014). The market reform gave birth to a market profit model of media in China. New commercial media were booming during 1980s and 1990s. Jiang’s age (Jiang Zemin’s governance started from 1989 and ended in 2002) saw media adopt a quiet conformity out of the fear caused by the 1989 student movement, and then dramatically transform by the deepening of the market economy, from government-financing to self-financing. Many commercial media showed commodity properties and directly faced the market of audience and readers. Media and market power started to merge (Qian, 2014).

Yet, Chinese media have since then been run under the framework of *institutions managed as enterprises*. The role of media in China has been recast by ‘the dual imperative of state control and market forces’ (Y. Zhao, 2001, p.37). Many media outlets in the late 1990s started bravely challenging political power. Media power entered the interplay with political power. They were also required by the government to generate some profits (Qian, 2014). As Qian sees it, being obedient to the authorities at the same time making money from the market was a creed for many media managers. As Y. Zhao (2001) explains, Chinese media, on the one hand, continue to play the role of propaganda institutions and have no reason to offend the Party who provide them the fundamental basis of market business. On the other hand, media rely on a market profit model based on advertising to attract an urban-based middle class as their customers (Y. Zhao, 2001).

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*Y. Zhao* (2001) argues that Deng Xiaoping’s governance endeavoured to liberate Chinese people from anti-capitalist ideas and to introduce the ideology of the market. Media since then have carried this agenda. As *Y. Zhao* (2001) claims, Chinese media ‘promoted the ideology of the market and championed market-oriented government policies, entrepreneurial role models, and successful businesses’ (p. 33).

*Southern Weekly* was born in a transition period as such. Considering the orientation towards a market economy at that time, it is not difficult to understand *Southern Weekly* journalists’ assertion of the liberal values in *Southern Weekly*’s economic section. In fact, being conservative in politics and liberal in economy reflects *Southern Weekly*’s obedience to the Party authorities. *Southern Weekly* was born when the Party was still fumbling along the way of establishing the regulation of market-based media enterprises, which means that it was granted opportunities to test the limits of the Party line (Guan, 2014) First published by South Daily Press (restructured and renamed Southern Media in 2005) in Guangdong, which Deng chose as an experimental base for the market economy, *Southern Weekly* also benefited from the unique open environment in its first two decades. Deng was said to utilise the critique of Cultural Revolution and Mao to
consolidate his power and to introduce the market economy, thus criticism of the leftists of some level was tolerated (Y. Zhao, 2001).

Following this history, the former Chief Editor Fang’s (took charge of Southern Weekly in 1996-2000 and was widely respected as a contributor to Southern Weekly’s rise) comment below may be better understood.

‘In 1999, Southern Weekly published the well-known New Year Greeting [entitled There is always a Force that Tears us, published in 1999, with many sentences well-remembered by readers], Shen Hao, who is the author of that New Year Greeting, said he was trying in the Greeting to demonstrate the passion of what combined the dreams of the Southern Weekly predecessors and the pursuit of the new successors, and it was about love, justice, and conscience….Maybe Southern Weekly has always been changing, but the direction and procedure of the change have always been to progress the country, always been pushing this country forward to be more civilised, more integrated into the world, and more a society with universal values. Of course at every stage the path of Southern Weekly is different. The 1990s was an era when civil awareness in Chinese society was awakened, hence it was the demands of the times that we focused on individuals’ needs and civil rights. So the guideline Justice, Conscience, Love, Rationality emerged….I experienced the most frustrating time when the reports of Zhang Jun case39 caused the large scale dismissal of many journalists including Qian Gang and Chang Ping who were the backbone of Southern Weekly. I was extremely hurt when I saw them suffer and finally leave…. In the 2000s, Southern Weekly put forward the aims of Understanding China from here. It somehow showed the target of the elit group as our readers, as they are the target group of our advertisers …. Since 2008 Southern Weekly and Southern Metropolis Daily have become the so-called Two South and the propaganda department has significantly tightened the regulation of the newspaper. Some people on the Internet started labelling Southern Weekly and others as Nanfang Xi40. So they [Southern Media] kept replacing the Chief Editor to tighten the regulation of the newspaper, but I have always been emphasising that the people who

39 The Zhang Jun case involved a series of notorious robberies and murders taking place in Hunan Province and beyond. Southern Weekly’s reports on the case analysis the social background of the case and pointed out the responsibility of the political conditions for the case. The reports infuriated the Hunan government and the central government. By then, Southern Weekly had been well-known for supervising the authorities in many regions of China.

40 Since around 2008, some Internet users started using the term Nanfang Xi (South faction) to categorise newspapers and magazines in Southern Media Corporation when they accuse them as traitors.
manage it should really understand what this newspaper has experienced and understand the people working for it’.

Fang’s explanation suggested that Southern Weekly may have experienced its best period playing a watchdog role during the first two decades after it was founded. It is safe to say that evolving in the peculiar evolvement of Guangdong which was the forefront of the openness of market in 1980s and 1990s, Southern Weekly benefited from the openness of a market economy and since then had been suffering from the changing regulation from the Party. Southern Weekly had been continually transformed both by the increasingly tightened authoritarian regulation and the profit imperative of winning an elite middle class market more than a decade ago. An audience of the middle class that had been growing and seeking a voice might help explain the ongoing liberalism of the newspaper.

It is clear that the evolution of Southern Weekly follows a complex trajectory that internalises political and market forces. As a senior editor of Southern Weekly revealed in my interview when being asked about his interpretation of the result of the Southern Weekly Incident,

‘It is very unclear looking at the result. In this Party system, all things that are related to ideologies and political power will all end with ambiguity. For the Party system, maintaining the stability with ambiguity is the best ruling situation. But for a newspaper which pursues professionalism, surviving with this ambiguity in many cases is terrible, but not the worst. The worst is that they dismiss the whole team and close the newspaper. It is very important for a newspaper like Southern Weekly to survive in this system’.

Indeed, understanding the approach of Southern Weekly staff in their confrontation requires me to understand the ideology the newspaper has been carrying in a dynamic form. Certainly, I more urgently need to examine the culture shaped by the people within this institutional architecture, in order to understand the complex institutional profile of the newspaper and how this affected the unfolding of the Incident.

I have mentioned some leaders of Southern Media, the Chief Editor of Southern Weekly, and the Deputy Chief Editors and other senior editors taking charge of Southern Weekly. Together with journalists in different sections of the newspaper, they constitute a typical form of a Chinese media organisation. Power and responsibility of different groups determined the distinct roles they played in the Southern Weekly Incident. On the top were the leaders of Southern Media, led by Yang Jian, who represented the propaganda department and the government in regulating the newspaper in its daily publication. In the Southern Weekly Incident, they were responsible for repressing the Incident and negotiating with journalists. In the middle were the senior staff of Southern Weekly, represented by the Chief Editor Huang Can, conducting routine censoring of the newspaper. In the Southern Weekly Incident, they (mainly Huang Can) were responsible for settling the incident and the team. In some journalists’ opinions, these were the people ‘climbing
the ladder to the higher Party positions’. At the bottom were the majority of journalists who were apparently suffering under censorship in their daily professional practice. They were the victims in the Southern Weekly Incident. While these journalists may potentially be the most passionate actors for confrontation, the bottom position meant that they were to some extent powerless and vulnerable in the institutional system. This was also clear for the reverse situation – the higher position, the more power, and the more responsibility for their accountability for the Party, the more risky it is to play a rebellious role, thus the less possible to participate in the confrontation. A journalist confessed that he felt somehow safe when he was actively posting stories of reports being censored during the Southern Weekly Incident, because ‘when the ceiling falls, the tall guys will have to support it, not short ones like me’.

This structure of media organisation implied the irreconcilable relationship between different groups of Southern Media employees in the Southern Weekly Incident. A few seasoned Southern Media employees pointed out that the historical achievement of Southern Weekly in the 1980s and 1990s should be attributed to a coalition of the leaders of the corporation, the senior staff of Southern Weekly and the frontier journalists of the newspaper. As they saw it, leaders such as Fang and others were brave and willing to take risks and make great contributions to evolve the newspaper. However, as a seasoned editor commented, such a coalition ‘seemed impossible in the current age’, since many of the current leaders in Southern Media were appointed by the government and the propaganda department. As was repeatedly pointed out by a few journalists, the current leaders of Southern Media were propaganda officers rather than journalists. The division and conflicts inside the institution shaped the Southern Weekly Incident, as we can see from the internal negotiations. The division and conflicts were apparently intensified in the Southern Weekly Incident, as many Southern Weekly journalists explained.

In addition, employees’ superiors are held accountable for the employees’ compliance with party authorities. Doing the superiors (who were accountable to other Party leaders who manage them) a favour by avoiding causing trouble to them becomes a typical concern for maintaining a good relation with the superiors. This type of mechanism also contributed to the restriction of journalists’ confrontation in the Southern Weekly Incident.

The above description of the institutional structure is certainly only a crude portrait. The positions of individuals within the system are often obscure. However, this portrait may help to explain the lack of unity and leadership within Southern Media in the Southern Weekly Incident. In the analysis of the mechanisms of action in the Southern Weekly Incident, I discussed citizens’ identification with a collective group (sometimes a broad sense of sufferers or citizens) as an encouraging mechanism which effectively facilitated citizens’ passion and reduced fears in protest. Though a collective identity was also found among journalists during the incident, the political risks for journalists protesting were obviously higher, and the emotional connection and a sense of collectivity were not strong enough to mobilise radical action. In such a diverse institution, the lack of organising and lack of leaders for organising somewhat restricted their action to only online.
As a journalists expressed, ‘nobody had both the courage and capacity to mobilise the whole group which was highly divided’.

I have followed the storyline of the internal negotiation between *Southern Weekly* and senior Southern Media staff to retell the unfolding of the *Southern Weekly* Incident. I have also expanded my discussion to review the institutional ideology and culture of *Southern Weekly* under political control in a historical context, in order to understand their negotiation with the authorities. Through these deepened examinations of the underlying principle of media’s survival and the architecture where media people are situated, I addressed how the media system as institutional power influenced the *Southern Weekly* Incident.

7.2. **Negotiation with the self**

Despite journalists’ action being clearly restricted by their intention to negotiate with the authorities in order to avoid political punishment, it would be problematic to simplify journalists’ complex approach to the incident as being repressed, as if repression was explicit and journalists were completely passive actors after being repressed. The complexity should be understood not only from the intensity of the negotiation and the power relationship involved, but also from journalists and citizens’ self-censoring and self-restriction which had been forged in journalistic practice and daily online posting. In the next two sections I examine people’s self-restriction and means of self-protection, which ultimately led to a vague stance they held in the *Southern Weekly* Incident.

7.2.1. **Between political maturity and cowardice: Self-censoring, self-restriction**

‘I was very careful. I was included in a WeChat group of former *Southern Weekly* staff but I did not proactively join the discussion. I knew that every word and every sentence I posted would be monitored by the authorities. I did not do anything more than looking at what they were saying. The only time I spoke there was when they proposed to draft an open letter and I said that I supported it…. I of course had moral pressure in this case. But I was mature enough to calculate the risks and benefits before I did anything. I decided not to speak out, because speaking out meant that I had to leave the job. I am still doing well in the job and had not come to the point that I wanted to leave it. The worst situation would be that they framed you saying that you were the organiser and arrested you …. As senior managers of our magazine, we did not restrict our journalists’ activity. Of course in this way we lost the trust from those in the senior positions of Southern Media. But they did not have any reason to sack me. I did not want to be promoted anyway….I think this was so called political maturity. You may say I was sophisticated and tricky. But it is the way of living in this system and at the same time doing something meaningful’.
This explanation was provided by Li Jian, the senior editor of *Southern People Weekly*. He elaborated on what he called political maturity. Self-censoring and self-restriction were commonly practiced by most journalists in the incident. Some journalists argued that their restricted expression was another way to promote China’s democratic transformation, since ‘it was the only way to work within the system’. As a senior editor of Southern Media claimed,

‘We are the liberals within the system. If China is progressing towards democracy, the activists or the brave people who take radical action are important, and so are we. We are also an integral part of the force in this progress’.

Rather than seeing journalists’ self-censoring and self-restriction as particular strategies adopted in the incident, it is apt and important to understand them by examining a deep-down self-discipline that had been forged in their career. Now I would like to examine journalists’ self-discipline at work to understand their self-restriction in the *Southern Weekly* Incident.

As Fang, the seasoned journalist and leader of Southern Media, put it,

‘It is still a real luxury to talk about pursuing press freedom in current China. Practising journalism for so many years, we all know that the ceiling is always there and what we are doing is just to try to touch the ceiling. We expand the boundary until it touches the ceiling, and that is the best result we are pursuing’.

*Touch the ceiling, cut the corner, hit the red line*, etc. were the phrases very often used by journalists to describe their strategies for avoiding political risks at work, meaning that knowing where the boundary was, and fully expanding journalistic coverages close to but within the limitation of the boundary, is key. Interestingly, the same phrases were also used by journalists when describing the situation of political risks being caused by their reports. For example, journalists in my interviews often said ‘I only hit the red line but did not cross it’ as well as ‘I did not hit the red line’. As equivocal as the phrases themselves may imply, journalists’ working strategies were played with flexibility and caution in every step. As a *Southern Weekly* journalist stated,

‘I am already very used to self-censoring. Very rarely have my articles been killed. Even when I begin to choose the particular topic for report, I am already conducting strict self-censoring. There are some good topics I have chosen not to report. This is an issue of life value. I think being content is important in life. So I appreciate the current space given to us to do something and I try my best to do a good job…. Some of my colleagues tried every method to challenge the policy and ended up losing ground for practising journalism. I think this is a huge loss, both for the very talented people themselves and for society. I believe that though I self-censor my work, I still produce useful
reports for society. It is the same on Weibo, I don't want to lose ground for posting. So self-censoring is important and not a big deal'.

Many journalists in my interviews similarly worked constructively when facing media censorship. Specifically, they emphasised the value of holding a positive attitude in doing journalism rather than focusing on the limitations brought about by censorship. As a senior editor of Southern Weekly put it, ‘If you always feel helpless and frustrated and only complain, you cannot do anything useful’. An investigative reporter in Beijing News, rejected the attachment of idealism to journalism. As she put it,

‘When there is a ban passed by the propaganda department, we just see how we can interpret the ban in a different way. For example, if the ban instructs that a particular news story needs to be correctly guided, then we know we can still report it; if the ban instructs that we cannot comment on the news story, then we know we still can report it and just not to publish comments. Everybody has their job in this system. The propaganda officers are responsible for doing the censoring and drafting the accurate instructions. We are to interpret the instructions and do our job. I would not confront the regulation. I am against attaching extra meaning to this job, for example, something noble, moral, or heroic, but just want to be professional and objective in doing reports. It is just a job, like a tailor’s job. Maybe journalism is loaded with more social responsibility, but as journalists we are the same as tailors who pursue perfectionism at work. A good tailor cares about doing perfect clothes for both patricians and plebeians. The same, I don’t care for whom I produce my work’.

This elaboration made reference to two central concepts in Chinese journalism: professionalism and idealism. As I have discussed in an earlier section, Southern Weekly staff were irritated and took action when they felt that their journalistic professionalism was challenged. They rejected being viewed as being motivated to confront censorship. Apparently, journalists’ preference of discussing professionalism to idealism, at least when framing their feeling and motivation of action, showed a deep self-restriction. Ridiculing idealism was a somewhat peculiar way by which Chinese journalists rejected so-called political innocence (as they would prefer to show the so-called political maturity). The paradox in journalists’ approach to idealism was demonstrated: while they pursued the promotion of idealistic social values such as social justice, equality, human rights, etc., they rejected the discussion about them, as we can see from the Beijing News journalists’ rejection of attaching ‘something noble, moral, or heroic’ to journalism. As Yuan, a journalist of Southern People Weekly explained,

‘We are too used to being censored. So when we talk about a case about journalistic idealism, we naturally have to ridicule it, otherwise it felt like we
were the journalists who were so innocent and had never actually experienced Chinese journalism’.

As revealed by many media workers in my interviews, the blow dealt by the emergence of new media industries had made traditional media more desperate to secure their survival by accepting Party regulation. In light of the huge amount of capital flowing to new media industries, many journalists felt that journalistic idealism was less rewarding than ever before. Being self-critical about the media culture, Mu Tian, Chief Editor of Southern People Weekly, expressed his disappointment about journalism in recent years. As he explained, ‘In China, good journalism is covering something meaningful and it may be risky to report but we still do it. Disappointingly, it is rare in recent years and it is not all about Party regulation’.

Journalistic professionalism for Chinese journalists may mean the pursuit of objectivity, truth, and independence in conducting reports, as many of them revealed in my interviews (this research does not intend to discuss this journalistic concept, for an explanation of journalistic professionalism in the Chinese context see Tong, 2006). Understanding this concept in the practical context, it proposes a constructive way of working with censorship. As pointed out by journalists, journalists tended to challenge censorship when they felt their professional pursuit at work was damaged, whilst they found it more risky to do so when they could not frame censorship as damage to professionalism. Evidently, professionalism for Chinese journalists was both a work principle and an effective weapon for resisting being censored beyond their tolerance, and this professionalism facilitated a commensalism of resistance and self-discipline. Professionalism provided rules for daily journalistic practice, offered the idea to journalists when assessing how far they can challenge censorship, and reassured journalists in the way that facilitated the framing of the values of journalistic work when the values involved in journalists’ idealism were mostly unrealistic. Gradually, professionalism became the rule of self-discipline commonly adopted by journalists when idealism was challenged. As an environmental reporter in Southern Weekly explained,

‘I just want to conduct good quality environmental reports. I understand journalistic idealism in a different way. I think that as long as we do good quality environmental reports, these reports no doubt have a positive impact on our habitat. This is also the realisation of journalistic idealism’.

In the sense that Chinese journalists pursue everyday resistance (Scott, 1985) to censorship, both confrontation and self-discipline are practiced by journalists on a day-to-day basis. This kind of routine practice in journalism was somewhat relocated in journalists’ daily online posting, shaping their particular style of confrontation in cases such as the Southern Weekly Incident. In the Southern Weekly Incident, journalists confronted the authority when the censoring damaged their professionalism (the authorities framed them for being accountable for all superficial mistakes in the newspaper), whilst tended not to challenge the Party policy of censoring. Many journalists were cautious to ‘only post information that was absolutely true’, as they emphasised.
Some journalists described themselves as ‘self-immune’ (similar to ‘frogs in warm water’), meaning feeling apathetic about the repression enforced on them. They explained that their frequent encountering of censorship had lessened their sensitivity to suffering. As a journalist, who had been a reporter specialising in political coverage for 10 years in *Southern Weekly*, elaborated,

‘I was more apathetic rather than feeling much. This was related to my experience as a politics reporter. I already feel very little political passion in any incident… If we confronted [the authorities] to the point where we had to quit the job, then they would be just as happy about that. Our resignations did not pose a threat to them. It would be just pointless. No matter how much you say on the Internet, it is pointless.’

Journalists also described themselves with self-mockery by using the phrases *the less trouble the better* and *not to stir and trigger trouble*. Hai, the very cynical commentator in *Southern Metropolis Daily* who criticised many journalists in the *Southern Weekly* Incident as being ‘smart and sophisticated in the way that they calculated their losses and gains very carefully’, elaborated with bitterness, ‘people think I am not generous and I am too mean, so they don’t like me’. To maintain a harmonious relationship with colleagues and with a journalist community, the rule of self-restraint was widely abided by.

For many Chinese citizens, an intriguing fact about the Chinese Internet is that although censoring is relentless and noticeable, the rules for censoring in actual practice, and specifically what kind of online behaviour leads to personal punishments (e.g. sacking, arrest, etc.), are somewhat ambiguous. The ambiguity of the regulation of the Chinese Internet leaves Internet users much room for imagination and temptation. Various strategies are practised by citizens to test the boundary of censorship. This practice in the *Southern Weekly* Incident was seen in their race against post deletion, in the form of avoiding words that showed anti-government and anti-Party tendency and contained highly sensitive references (such as the State Security Department) and posting artful and creative images and texts (discussed in Chapter 5). Yet, caution was held by most Weibo users with self-restriction in online posting. The self-restriction of Weibo users’ posting activities during the *Southern Weekly* Incident can be summarised as the following four types:

- ‘I did not ask anybody to go with me…’

‘I did not ask anybody to go with me. But I knew that as long as my friends knew I was there, they would also go’, an activist said. Avoiding creating an explicit summons to an offline gathering had been commonly recognised by journalists and citizens as one of the most important principals for self-protection. The legal charges of *disturbing public order* had been widely enforced on online and offline action that potentially initiates street gathering. Therefore, avoiding posting messages
that contained collective action potential (in physical offline locations) had become the primary concern in the *Southern Weekly* Incident.

Similarly, avoiding association with other social groups was also a form of self-protection. For this reason, Journalists deliberately distanced themselves from citizens protesting in support of the newspaper.

- **‘I did not say it, but reposted and shared it’**

As often explained by many Weibo users in my interviews, they 'did not actively send posts, but only reposted and shared other people’s opinions' during the *Southern Weekly* Incident. In their opinions, claiming 'only reposting' was an effective form of self-defence when facing official charges.

Reposting also was carried out selectively with caution, though personal interpretation of the sensitivity varied. As *Southern Weekly* journalist claimed,

> 'I will not repost those extreme people’s posts, for example, those activists’. Some of them may have similar ideologies to mine, but apparently they prefer to take a very extreme approach to political incidents, which is very different from mine. So I will not even follow them on Weibo and I don't want to know what they say'.

- **Weibo and WeChat**

Using WeChat rather than Weibo shows people’s preference for the relative secrecy of WeChat to the publicness of Weibo. Relying on a self-established network in which users somewhat decided who were the recipients of their posts, WeChat was then regarded as relatively more private and protected. During the particular time when the *Southern Weekly* Incident emerged, WeChat was apparently granted much freedom. Control of WeChat had yet to be established (for many people, the relaxing and secure feeling about WeChat subsequently significantly collapsed after relentless deletion being conducted on it over the following year).

- **‘I only said the absolute truth’**

The charge of spreading misinformation or rumours was also widely-known as having been applied by the authorities to frame confrontation in online posting. Making sure that all the information posted had a source or evidence had become a fundamental principle of self-discipline. Lai, a *Southern Weekly* editor, explained,

> 'As a media worker, I am responsible for every word I publish in our newspaper or post online. I do self-censoring every day. Everything I write down has supporting evidence. Every word I post online has its reference'.
Lai’s job in the comment section of Southern Weekly included editing readers’ letters to the newspaper. Despite being heavily censored, Lai explained, the comment section of Southern Weekly still endeavoured to supervise authorities’ power abuse and regularly showed strong critical views of policy execution. This meant that rigorous control of what to be published was required in order to make sure that all criticism was well-grounded. As Lai emphasised, the facts should be ‘the absolute truth’.

In 2012, Lai published a reader’s letter which was then criticised by a senior officer and as he said, ‘caused huge trouble to the newspaper’. He claimed that this job had significantly caused his self-restraint in many social events, as was the way he approached the Southern Weekly Incident. As he elaborated,

‘In every issue of the newspaper we have articles being censored or killed. Having been doing this job for a long time, I have already become an abnormal person. I always over-censor myself. In the Southern Weekly Incident, I was not very active. I said things that really discouraged my colleagues when they were quite excited about the potential victory.’

The self-restraint of only speaking ‘the absolute truth’ was demonstrated by many journalists’ withdrawal from further action when the Chief Editor and deputy Chief Editor revealed that the New Year Edition was not directly modified by Minister Tuo. For many journalists, there was no absolute truth to be the ground for them to stand on and being charged for spreading misinformation became a primary concern. The information of Tuo’s absence in the modification was also spread around small groups of citizens and caused their concern. To take an example, a group of journalism students in a university jointly issued a statement to support Southern Weekly. They deleted the post of the statement after being warned that ‘the absolute truth of the case was unclear’ (The students were also continually pressured by university officials to withdraw from the joint statement or delete the statement).

As my previous analysis has shown, conflicting views of journalists’ action (and non-action) existed in the Southern Weekly Incident, typically exemplified by many journalists’ self-defence about political maturity and many others’ criticism of their cowardice. For certain, strategies for self-protection were adopted by most people involved in the Southern Weekly Incident, both consciously and unconsciously. Yet, journalists’ relatively more sophisticated approaches to political topics, presented through more cautious self-restraint, to a great extent contributed to these contradictory views of different groups of people. For many people, journalists’ political stance in the Southern Weekly Incident was questionable. The question of where to stand in such an ideological battle was hard to answer by journalists themselves, and obviously called for a complex self-negotiation by the journalists.
7.2.2. The vague stance – Hold the flag of press freedom or keep away from it?

Avoiding publicly discussing press freedom, while being forced by public pressure, journalists in the *Southern Weekly* Incident adopted a vague political stance. Holding the flag of press freedom was, at the earlier stage, effective for gaining wide public support of citizens, and at the later stage, somewhat irresistible under huge public pressure. It is apt to say that journalists in the *Southern Weekly* Incident had to continually decide how close they stood to the flag of press freedom. Their vague stances to some extent reflect the dynamics of collective action triggering a public sphere ‘in formation’.

The vague stance was adopted in the journalists’ form of action and their specific approach. To be more precise, they carefully expressed the dissatisfaction with the regulation enforced on their journalistic practice rather than with censorship. They defended themselves in journalistic professionalism rather than pursuing idealism. They restricted their action to remain online rather than expanding it offline. In this way, they claimed to stick to their ideological values of not agreeing with the Party, while obviously did not pose a fundamental challenge to censorship. As a senior journalist in Southern Media put it,

‘I expressed my values within my framework. I did not betray my values. That’s enough for me. Other people may want to do something radical. It was their freedom and I would be happy to see other people doing that. Why did I need to resign? I am sure if *Southern Weekly* staff all resigned, the next day they [the authorities] could immediately re-organise a new team to run the newspaper. Staying here, within the system, was my way of expressing my values’.

The framework of connective action based on diverse appeals and personalised expressions in the *Southern Weekly* Incident apparently allowed more room for the vague stance in the contemporary network of action. The sheer amount of traffic on the web where information is constantly updated means that people cannot all monitor the same information. As a result, the understanding of a particular issue, drawing on different and multiple sources, can become ambiguous (Jordan, 2015). Some journalists in the *Southern Weekly* Incident argued that their online expression ‘was simply a release of emotion’ and they ‘did not intend to trigger serious discussions and debates’. Surely, a great number of online expressions which simply represented a release of emotion in the *Southern Weekly* Incident may effectively shield some people’s ambiguous political stance.

More importantly, the diverse and irreconcilable political ideologies in current China contributed to a social deliberation that was as a whole complex and somewhat beyond individuals’ comprehension. In some journalists’ views, lack of a ‘common base line of ideologies’ (Qin, 2013, p.4) in current China was ‘a fatal factor’ determining the failure of the *Southern Weekly* Incident to become a huge-scale social movement. Surely, the complicated ideologies in Chinese society
in a general sense meant that the presentation of political stance was often blurred, which also allowed individual vague stances to widely exist in the network in the *Southern Weekly* Incident.

Certainly, the way in which individuals made sense of their approach in the *Southern Weekly* Incident was also complicated. The Party’s comprehensive ideological enforcement in people’s life experiences and education played a crucial role. To take one example, Liao Xin, an investigative journalist for *Beijing News* did not participate in co-signing open letters in the *Southern Weekly* Incident, though she was relatively active in posting online. Liao had gained a great reputation for being brave and firm when confronting authorities to report social unfairness and injustice. Despite experiencing many cases of fighting against authorities, Liao explained that her political belief was ‘very within the Party’, which limited her action in the *Southern Weekly* Incident. We may understand more of her ideological opinions from her elaboration of her life experience.

‘My family is a military family. I grew up in the army’s compound. My dad just retired last year from his post as a senior officer in the army. Growing up in that environment, I naturally agree with the Party system. I believe that the Party system is so powerful and strong that cannot at all be challenged and it is thus pointless to make the effort. I don’t have dissatisfaction with the Party system… I don’t like talking about June 4th protest [in 1989 student movement]. That is a very sensitive topic for the military. I cannot accept talking about it. When I was studying in university, some very left scholars talked about June 4th protest in class. In my mind that incident is a student riot and this is a definite fact in my knowledge since I was very young. I felt they talking about the incident was an insult to my many years’ life experience. I had to leave the class….

I may have the sense of resignation. I don’t hope to promote more press freedom in the current environment and don’t want to be a victim or a hero of pursuing press freedom. I only want to expand what we can do for journalism within the current news regulation. Maybe it is a so-called cynical reason…. My university education of journalism also did not make much reference to ideologies but emphasised on professionalism in doing journalism [Liao graduated from a university whose journalism education is top in China]. This education was given to me at that age when my brain was blank and since then the pursuit of professionalism rather than anything ideological has been deep in my mind….

I don’t understand why I should sign the open letters in the *Southern Weekly* Incident. I don’t understand how those people made their decision to sign it. Did they really not care about making money and earning a living? Some people criticised journalists for not daring to resign in the incident. I don’t
understand that. Don’t they need to earn money to raise their kids, take care of their parents, and buy a house? ‘

This explanation may appear to be a mixture of Liao’s genuine beliefs of Party politics and her compliance after feeling not being able to challenge the system. This is clearly exemplified by her expression of ‘I naturally agree with the Party system’ and ‘the Party system is so powerful and strong that cannot at all be challenged and it is thus pointless to make the effort’. It may be questioned that this still reflects her resignation with Party suppression rather than her personal beliefs. However, it is important to understand the consideration of the two aspects – what is ideal and what is possible – always co-existed and are intertwined to shape people’s ideology. In China where the Party regulation penetrates every aspect of the society, it is especially important to understand that the consideration of what is ideal is to a great extent restricted by what is possible. In other words, the political restriction is consciously and unconsciously internalised as part of people’s ideology.

A senior *Southern Weekly* journalist who was also a university lecturer in journalism is another example. The journalist and scholar claimed to be a centrist in political orientation and believed that certain types of political news should be restricted in publication. He frankly revealed that he taught the necessity of news regulation in class and it obeyed his genuine thoughts. Examples like this reflected the complication of personal political stances in the *Southern Weekly* Incident.

A vague political stance was thus taken by many people during the *Southern Weekly* Incident for various reasons, facilitated by an inclusive network, and more complicatedly shaped and shielded by the diverse political ideologies in China.

In summary, the effects of political conditions on the *Southern Weekly* Incident were demonstrated by journalists and citizens’ negotiation with the authorities and the self. Firstly, journalists’ online behaviour was restricted by their concern with rulings by the authorities and the need to maintain the negotiation within Southern Media and with the propaganda department. Politics also shaped a distinct institutional culture of *Southern Weekly* in which internal negotiation was facilitated. Secondly, political repression in China worked through osmosis in journalists and citizens’ habitual consideration of professional and social behaviour, and led to their self-censoring and self-restriction in the *Southern Weekly* Incident. Specifically, politics shaped journalists’ self-discipline in their long-term journalistic practice and work-related considerations also applied to their daily lives, typically exemplified by online posting. More fundamentally, the sensitivity brought about by politics influences the forming of the culture of ‘the less trouble the better’. In this context, various posting strategies were adopted by journalists and citizens in their online posting to facilitate what they may assume to be an effective means of self-protection. The particular self-discipline was also their negotiation with the self, that is, to claim their political maturity and reject being accused of cowardice. Finally, a vague political stance was taken by people who rejected clearly expressing the pursuit of press freedom while vaguely embracing press freedom. Journalists endeavoured to maintain the public’s support and stick to their
democratic values without posing a direct challenge to the Party system. An inclusive network and the complication of ideologies in China also facilitated the vague presentation of political stance in the Southern Weekly Incident.

I hope that this part of the discussion that foregrounds the context of the Southern Weekly Incident is meaningful for exploring something transcending the Southern Weekly Incident. Specifically, I hope the media culture shaped within institutions to some extent helps reflect the profound institutional culture universally existing in all fields in Chinese society. From this wider perspective, Southern Weekly Incident is one historical incident which in some aspects mirror many other incidents forged by the political and commercial conditions in China. People working for Southern Weekly are groups of Chinese people who in some respects mirror many others in various sectors of Chinese society. Their every success or failure in their individual story matters, not only for forming the future of the country, but also for the history that has to be grasped through unpacking the internalisation of what this country has given them.

7.3. The controversial testimony

In this section, I discuss the testimony episode of the Southern Weekly Incident which took place in December 2013. As the final episode of the Southern Weekly Incident, it demonstrates the complexity of the Chinese context for collective action which I discuss in this chapter.

In November 2013, Southern Media issued a testimony to assist the prosecution of activists who participated in the Southern Weekly protest in January. The testimony read,

‘….From 6 January to 9 January 2013, there were huge crowds gathering outside the gate of No.289 Guangzhou Avenue where the corporation is located. They greatly obstructed the normal working order in the corporation and impeded people and vehicles’ normal access to the press. The corporation had to open a side gate in order to allow the staff to enter and exit the press. Some meetings and activities in the corporation had to be cancelled’.

Under the charge of assembling a crowd to disrupt order in a public place, three activists Guo Feixiong, Liu Yuandong, Sun Desheng were prosecuted by the Guangzhou police. The testimony was made public on Weibo by a former journalist and activist. For many citizens and journalists who were not employees of Southern Media, the testimony was shocking and infuriating, as they felt betrayed by Southern Weekly which they risked their personal safety to support. An article entitled ‘Better for Southern Weekend to Die back then, rather than Keeping it Alive for Today’s Humiliation’, was posted on Weibo by a media worker and quickly reposted by many people. Guo Feixiong’s lawyer Zhang Xuezhong expressed condemnation of Southern Weekly on Weibo as such,
‘Southern Media issued the particular explanation in order to cooperate with the police in prosecuting [against Guo Feixiong], providing evidence of [Guo’s] disturbing public order. Back then, Southern Weekly called for people's support, and now they claimed that those supporters obstructed their working order. They turned white into black and avenged people's goodwill. They are an accessory to the tyrant’s crimes. Aren't they ashamed of printing their paper?’

For many journalists in Southern Media, being represented by the testimony was shameful and frustrating. Within two days after the testimony was revealed on Weibo, nearly 20 journalists in Southern Media posted their disagreement with the testimony, clarifying that their work during the few days was not disrupted. As the following posts posted on 28 December, 2013 demonstrated,

@ Su Shao:
‘I am Su Shaolin, an editor responsible for the editorial in the comment section of Southern Metropolis Daily. On 7 and 8 January, I was on duty editing the editorial section. Our daily meetings at 4.30pm were held as normal. Our editing work was conducted as normal. The censoring and signing of the newspaper were conducted as normal. It was as normal as any other time during my two and a half years working in this department. I hereby present this clarification’.

@ Xi Men Bu An:
‘Facing that testimony which is an accessory to the tyrant’s crimes, as a member of the corporation I feel shamed and disgraced. I declare on behalf of myself, what I saw differed from what was explained [in the testimony]. Those supporters were civilised, polite, and orderly. I hold different opinions from that of the testimony’.

@ Kuang Haiyan:
‘I am from Southern Metropolis Daily. As a member of Southern Media, I also feel ashamed! On that day, the people who supported Southern Weekly were very orderly. They stood on two sides and kept the middle path clear. Even when some people were accused to be Wu Mao [Fifty Cent Party], they [supporters of Southern Weekly] said “Wu Mao should also be given the right to speak”. They showed real civility’.

@ Gong Xiaoyue:
‘… Those leaders who whitewashed their unjust action, in the guise of protecting their staff, you may be timid, but you must not be dishonest. The jobs of the staff were not given by you. You don't have the right to kidnap the
passionate young people. They still have a boundless life and should not have to bear the disgrace brought about by your cheap values’.

These posts were deleted shortly after but reposted by many other people. With the condemnation of Southern Weekly growing on Weibo and WeChat, some Southern Weekly staff spoke out about their innocence in the testimony episode. As a Southern Weekly journalist posted on Weibo,

@Yuan Duanduan:
‘People reprimanded us. But the stamp [which is put on the testimony] is of the corporation. The corporation has rejected many of our demands since the beginning of the year. We did not know and would definitely not agree with this behaviour….’

A seasoned employee of Southern Media angrily explained,

‘The role of the boss of Southern Media has been taken by the deputy Minister of the Provincial Propaganda Department. It is so normal for them to issue that testimony!’

Given the absence of outsiders in the backroom negotiations between Southern Weekly and their leaders in Southern Media, it is understandable that journalists who were not Southern Weekly employees and some citizens felt hurt and betrayed by Southern Weekly in the testimony episode. Defending themselves, Southern Weekly staff clearly divorced themselves from Southern Media, pointing out that it was Southern Media who issued the testimony and they were not informed. This point was obviously not easily understood and accepted by citizens and some journalists outside Southern Weekly. For outsiders who treated the Southern Weekly Incident as an ideological struggle, Southern Weekly and Southern Media as a whole represented their ideological pursuit of democratic values and press freedom.

It is fair to say that the secrecy of the backroom negotiations between Southern Weekly and Southern Media leaders, the vague political stance taken by journalists, and the relatively mild appeals made by Southern Weekly had already sown the seeds for a dramatic final scene of the Southern Weekly Incident. All this may be rooted in the structural system of media corporations, which for media workers was ‘too complex to explain to outsiders in such a massive event like the Southern Weekly Incident’, as they put it. Moreover, media workers were unlikely to be able to explain the complexity of media system, given the political sensitivity of the issue.

The condemnation of Southern Weekly from Guo’s lawyer Zhang was interpreted by some journalists as ‘a strategic act’ to carry out his defence for Guo. As a journalist suggested,

‘Though Zhang may understand the situation in Southern Media, he needed to say it like that to gain the public’s rejection of Southern Media in order to better defend Guo’.
In an open letter addressed to journalists posted by Lawyer Zhang and another lawyer in December 2013, they claimed that ‘Southern Weekly is dead’ and called for support from journalists all over China. The open letter read,

‘…the death of Southern Weekly does not mean the death of Southern Weekly spirits. The Southern Weekly in the Southern Weekly Incident was already not representative of Southern Weekly spirits, but the betrayer of Southern Weekly spirits…. Southern Weekly spirits will never die and will always provide us with power and hope…. All my friends in Chinese journalism, as the defenders of Guo Feixiong, we hope you once again show your courage and conscience and give attention and support to Guo Feixiong and other people, who are prosecuted because of their pursuit of constitutional democracy and the country’s advancement…’

Ironically, divorcing Southern Weekly from its spirit was a way to deny the testimony and attacking Southern Weekly became a way to protect the people who protested for Southern Weekly in the Southern Weekly Incident. A Southern Media journalist posted an ambiguous message after this open letter as such: ‘Don’t quite agree with Zhang Xuezhong’s open letter. But it is not the time to discuss this’. For the purpose of protecting those protesters, many Southern Weekly staff preferred to be silent, as they explained in my interviews.

This episode of the testimony, as dramatic as other episodes in the Southern Weekly Incident that I have elaborated, summed up an irony underlining the Southern Weekly Incident – Southern Weekly was initially supported by the public and finally condemned by them. In some extreme observation, ‘Southern Weekly fell from grace, from being a hero promoting press freedom to a traitor colluding with the authorities’. It showed a peculiar employer-employee relationship and the conflicts within the institution under relentless political control and extreme daily regulation. Understanding this certainly needs to ride on the articulation of the institutional culture and the broad culture of self-restriction in Chinese society. As a journalist critically revealed,

‘We may push the blame of Southern Weekly in the testimony episode to the leaders of Southern Media. However, it is worth asking why we could not be like a unit and give the outsiders a convincing explanation. In this sense, there is nothing wrong when the outsiders criticised Southern Weekly’.
Chapter 8 Discussion and conclusion

8.1. The emergence of inevitability and contingency in the Southern Weekly Incident and beyond

In this research, the effects of the Internet on collective democratic action in China are explored through the case study of the Southern Weekly Incident. In particular, this case study explores both the elements that contributed to the inevitability of social mobilisation and the elements that caused the contingency of the Southern Weekly Incident. The inevitability of mobilisation was indicated by general social conditions, while specific conflicts around the Southern Weekly Incident contributed to contingencies.

The inevitability of social mobilisation should be understood as being caused by a few factors relating to the long-term social emotion of discontentment and the development of online contention in China. Firstly, the strict Party suppression of public expression and media censorship had prepared citizens’ emotions for action in which embodiment is mobilised. Secondly, the development of a contentious environment online had been nurturing citizens’ capacity for critical thinking, which included often the desire for democratisation in China thus providing cultural preparation for action. Thirdly, the expanding of an activist community, as can be seen from the Southern Weekly protest, provided a powerful network of organisation for street action. Lastly and most importantly, the use of the Internet in China activated and accelerated the emotional, cultural, networked, and organisational factors, which together contributed to the forming of the collective action in the Southern Weekly Incident.

The contingency of collective action in the Southern Weekly Incident should be understood as the particular circumstance caused by the timing, location, and central focus on Southern Weekly.

Firstly, the political atmosphere in China in the transition of leadership at the beginning of 2013 was unusual. Like many historical periods when transitions of leaderships took place, Xi’s endorsement of reform attracted people’s expectation of political change. His massive campaigns such as anti-corruption and deepening market reforms signalled change within the Party and institutions in China. The mobilisation of collective action in the Southern Weekly Incident obviously benefitted from the particular timing that allowed room for democratic imagination and thus promoted collective action through emotions and embodiment. It was also the particular timing of two months after the 18th Party Congress, when news reports were most rigorously controlled. Media workers in China expected the relatively looser regulation of reports after the Congress. The modification of the New Year Edition of Southern Weekly shattered this optimistic assumption and generated stronger emotion. Being in its heyday, Weibo also unprecedentedly encouraged popular discussion about social events among citizens. At the end of September 2012, Sina Weibo had 500 million registered users, with 46.3 million daily active users. Statistics show that this was the peak of Sina Weibo, with it going into decline from 2013 (Millward, 2013). The popularity of Weibo at the beginning of 2013, and its use for accessing information about
public affairs is a key factor of the context in which the Southern Weekly Incident emerged, which indicates the contingency of technologies in politics.

Secondly, Southern Weekly was a well-respected newspaper, which had been widely attached to liberal and democratic values by audiences, and which internally held high expectations of idealism and professionalism. Southern Weekly aggregated huge swathes of public support which was not usually seen in other Chinese media. The influential position of Southern Weekly in China had attracted extremely strict regulation (particularly imposed on the ‘Two South’ - Southern Weekly and Southern Metropolis Daily, as discussed in Chapter 4 and 5) by the Party since 2008. The propaganda minister in the Southern Weekly Incident’s abnormal censoring style contributed to this specificity. As the elders of Southern Media recalled, since its establishment in 1984 and blossoming in the 1990s and 2000s, Southern Weekly had never publicly confronted the censorship imposed on it, though many journalists had experienced individual struggles and resigned. As many journalists recalled, the emotion of journalists at the beginning of 2013 was on the verge of breaking out. The New Year Edition, in particular the editorial New Year Greeting, had a prominent position in the publication of the newspaper. Since the first New Year Greeting being published in January 1999, readers had placed high value on these particular editorials and many intellectuals were able to recite sentences of them. The 2013 Southern Weekly Incident was ignited at the point the New Year Edition was published, which generated unprecedented rage from both the journalists and citizens and created huge power for collective action.

Thirdly, the city of Guangzhou, where the newspaper is based, consisted of arguably the most developed civic culture in China. Owing to the openness of the market economy in this southern city, Guangzhou had seen civil power growing in various sectors. As we can see from the example of the activist community, activists were well grounded in Guangzhou where they regularly practised collective action in the Southern Street Movement.

The Southern Weekly Incident was a contingent emergence under the inevitable conditions for social mobilisation. The union of inevitable factors and contingent factors of social mobilisation was facilitated by the use of the Internet, particular the use of Weibo and WeChat. Weibo and WeChat provided a melting pot of all sorts of information transmitted through networks. Information shared by citizens on Weibo and WeChat, presenting the contingent factors, effectively enhanced emotional and cultural factors that underpinned possible mobilisation. Specifically, Weibo and WeChat provided the only source of information about the Southern Weekly Incident. Weibo effectively facilitated popular discussion about the incident and was used to host a series of online declarations and petitions which were initiated by journalists and supported by citizens, despite the relentless and intensive post deletion conducted under the instruction of the authorities. The discussion and action on Weibo directly triggered some citizens’ street protest, and provided motivation to the activist network which efficiently implemented wider social mobilisation. Weibo and WeChat were also powerful tools adopted during the street protest. The street protest in the Southern Weekly Incident was not organised in a strict sense, but
autonomous organising was completed by the network itself through the broadcasting effects of Weibo and WeChat.

Through the use of Weibo and WeChat, journalists and citizens pursued various forms of action in the Southern Weekly Incident, both online or offline, vocal or physical. The mechanisms of embodiment and various types of emotions such as excitement, outrage, irritation, and moral shame were powerfully promoted online. A framework of connective action based on diverse appeals and personalised expressions was established and various voices in a social network echoed to become coherent confronting forces. Mechanisms of emotions, embodiment, and the logic of connective action compete with state repression and ideologies, promoting or constraining mobilisation. The peculiar form of online and offline action seemingly segmented and directed by different groups should also be attributed to information diffusion and network connection facilitated by the use of the Internet. Information shared online was widely accessible hence the possibility of adoption of the issues by different groups. Pre-existing networks such as the activist community networks and newly-established networks, mobilised action of members in the networks without explicitly organising action. The interplay between online voice and offline action finally implemented the massive scale of collective action in the Southern Weekly Incident.

In summary, the emergence of collective action in the Southern Weekly Incident is a case of power play between politics, the market, technologies, and civil society in digital China. The long-term political suppression by state regulation and the democratic ideas of the enlightened Chinese people have been constantly triggering collective action in China through emotional and cultural mobilisation by the Internet. The potential for certain issues to mobilise collective action rests significantly on the level at which the inevitability of action has developed through contingent factors. The Internet itself does not empower Chinese society, but it unites the inevitable and contingent factors of social mobilisation and thus engineers the emergence of collective action.

8.2. The Internet, the information – action through technology outruns control

The Southern Weekly Incident demonstrates that the Internet became the only source for information of sensitive issues, in the context that Chinese media were subject to strict control. While online censoring and post deletion were relentless, information was still fed all-pervasively through citizens’ creative strategies to spread information. Chinese Internet users utilised the time gap before post deletion was carried out to promote information as widely as possible. The gap of a few seconds or minutes needed for post deletion promised some release of information, like little sparks that had the potential of starting a prairie fire. Promoting the wide spread of information was not without citizens’ conscious efforts to maintain a post relay. In this intensive game, action through technology was running faster than control. Regardless that the limited space on the Internet may in some way promote neoliberalism (Zhao, 2008) and communicative capitalism (Dean, 2003, 2005), being able to access information even only by a small proportion of Chinese
people means the initiation of democratic possibilities. In short, information is powerful in promoting the democratisation of Chinese society.

Utilising technology for action is also ahead of control in the sense that the state’s control on a particular online application has to follow the rapid evolution of technology, hence the lag between the popularity of a particular Internet application and the control of it. While Weibo enforced strict censorship to control the spread of information during the Southern Weekly Incident, WeChat saw relatively loose regulation and efficiently facilitated group discussion and offline assembly. Resembling Twitter and Facebook’s roles in recent social movements, China’s Weibo and WeChat in the Southern Weekly Incident arguably showed different advantages in mobilisation. Gerbaudo (2012) argues that Twitter and Facebook in recent movements respectively played the roles of spreading information and organising action groups. Weibo and WeChat in the Southern Weekly Incident similarly played the respective roles of disseminating information and organising people, and they together made the mobilisation of online action and certain levels of offline action possible. Yet, the control of WeChat has been tightened since 2014, most effectively through prompt post deletion and the censoring of public accounts. The regulation of WeChat in 2013 onwards in some way demonstrates the lag between its popular use and the control of it, which allowed it to be adopted for promoting the Southern Weekly Incident. In other words, when the civil power of a particular Internet application may be gradually deprived, new applications may also emerge to create a new gap where power of technology continues to grow.

In addition, the effectiveness of a particular digital application to provide information is not possible to be completely removed. As the recent event of the Tianjin explosion which took place in August 2015 proved, Weibo which had seen a decline in the past two years still maintained its significance for disseminating information in massive social events. Videos and images of the explosions were promptly posted on Weibo, making the relevant information under the hashtags of #Tianjin Explosion# or #Tianjin Beihai Explosion# the top trending hashtags in the next few days. People on Weibo organised events to donate blood for the injured in Tianjin’s various hospitals and hundreds of people were reportedly lined up to donate blood (WOW, 2015). Despite instructions from the government to stop news and images of the explosions trending (CDT, 2015a), Weibo still acted as an information portal for this event.

The Party’s repression of the Southern Weekly Incident and press freedom in China, ironically indicates huge potential for new media to develop in China, as has also been evidently proved in recent years. In the global context, the challenge of new media to traditional media has been widely recognised and new forms of operating traditional media have been discussed accordingly. The dramatic decline of traditional media in China has however been discussed with more

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41 On 12 August 2015, a series of explosions occurred at the Port of Tianjin where hazardous materials were stored in shipping containers, killing over one hundred people and causing hundreds of others to be injured. Fires caused by the initial explosions continued to cause additional huge explosions during the weekend. The Chinese government received public criticism with regard to the censoring of news coverage of the event on mainstream media and social media, and failure to respond efficiently.
pessimism in tight association with the lethal party regulation. As my elaboration in Chapter 7 has shown, an institutional architecture within media that ensures the Party power underpins media operation and restricts media’s marketisation. Facing fierce competition with new media which promises various ways of bypassing Party censorship, traditional media in China may be incapable of holding the ground in this media war. Under the threat of the development of new media, traditional media has been struggling to generate a profit and forced to compromise by being increasingly compliant with Party regulation. With resignation, many media workers asserted that the Southern Weekly Incident represented a last struggle for traditional media in China – a last gasp. As a newspaper journalist in my interview sighed, ‘we all know we are fatally dying under the strong blow of new media, why not die in a noble struggle for press freedom’ (referring to fighting for Southern Weekly).

During 2014, the Southern Media Group, which is one of the most influential media organisations in China, saw 202 members of staff leaving the company. Among them, most were journalists and editors and most of them were employed by new media companies or started self-employment in digital industries (Sina, 2015). The strong voice of journalists for confrontation, presented at some level in the Southern Weekly Incident, certainly does not disappear with the decline of traditional media. Rather than lamenting the decline of traditional media, I would like to point out that the huge scale of the transition of media workers from traditional media to digital media implies stronger power for media workers who are now equipped with more efficient tools for social mobilisation. The fast development of new media and digital industries in China, facilitated by the people who have practised journalistic professionalism and skills of confronting Party regulation, and still hold the idealism of democratisation in China, signals greater power of information. Empowering new media, technology has an increasingly important role to play.

8.3. The network, the community – emotional display establishes identities

Collective identities in collective action in digital age are consolidated in a huge-scale network established through the Internet. As Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2001) argue, ‘Public displays of emotion are a regular movement strategy for forging and maintaining a collective identity’ (p. 23). In a broader sense, the Internet promotes the publicity of emotions and embodiment experiences within a huge-scale social community. A confrontational culture is shaped within social networks, which are continuously strengthened to prepare for collective action. In the sense latent networks are formed in collective action and are effective for mobilising future action (Melucci, 1996a), all expressions on the Internet within an event entail latent effects for further mobilisation.

The mechanisms of emotions, embodiment, connective action, state repression, and ideologies in the Southern Weekly Incident powerfully worked within this broad sense of community. Many people’s feelings (e.g. journalists’ feeling of being morally kidnapped) were a result of living in an online community that enforced people’s public responsibilities. Like in any form of social
community, conflicts widely existed in different groups in the Southern Weekly Incident, in particular within the group of journalists, within the activist community, and between different groups. The mobilisation of the Southern Weekly Incident proved the effectiveness of the Internet for coordinating conflicts through the logic of connective action.

The cultural sense of community established through online networks can be more specifically seen from the example of the activist community in China. The activist community in China has also been established and expanded through a like-minded network rather than concrete membership. Take the activists in the Southern Weekly Incident, for example. Many of the activists were actively engaged in discussion in online forums in the 1990s, and despite many forums being closed down, they have since formed a strong network and been committed to promoting dissidence. Many activists were participants in the 1989 student movement and through the Internet they found the network where they could share past experience and common political beliefs with like-minded people. Using the Internet as a tool, the activist network in Guangzhou developed through the Southern Street Movement and expanded in many social events, and served to autonomously mobilise collective action while avoiding organising action in an institutional sense. As we can see from the Southern Weekly protest, the network played a pivotal role in initiating huge scale social mobilisation and through the protest, the network was expanded. When the activists met and merged with other citizens in the protest, more citizens became networked in the activist community and available to participate in future action.

In general, emotions are displayed through digital networks to promote a sense of community among network members. A sense of community, either established through public online expression, or specifically promoted through using the Internet as a tool, effectively facilitated collective identities for the majority of Internet users.

8.4. The public sphere, the democratisation

At the end of this discussion, let me follow the elements I concluded with in Chapter 2 to summarise the dynamics of the formation of a Chinese public sphere presented in this research. The formation of the public sphere in China is assumed to be a long-term social transformation through the promotion of indefinite occurrences of collective democratic action such as the Southern Weekly Incident. The Southern Weekly Incident saw the norms of information accessibility, discussion implementation, rationality, and initiative of participation being established and negotiated. Despite strict control, information accessibility and online discussion were facilitated by citizens and journalists strategically adopting various methods to bypass censorship, such as the race against deletion. Rationality and critical thinking were practised in online discussion in the Southern Weekly Incident. Citizens’ participation in online discussion or protest was powerfully mobilised through the mechanisms of embodiment, various emotions such as excitement, irritation, outrage, and moral shame, and diverse and personalised expressions through network presentations. Citizens’ everyday resistance to power abuse and authoritarian repression of human rights prepared their emotions and strategies for pursuing online contention.
Public discourse in the *Southern Weekly* Incident is on a social scale a practice of critical thinking. The formation of the public sphere is a long-term movement that relates to an ongoing movement of democratisation in China, in which the formation of the public sphere may always be both invoked and refused. Political economy theorists criticise online discussion as merely *clicktivism* (Morozov, 2009) and only contributing to communicative capitalism (Dean, 2005). Online discussion on Weibo and WeChat has also attracted similar critiques of being short-lived without leading to real change. However, online discussion in China, where a number of generations of people have been under comprehensive Party influence through education and institutional regulations, facilitates enlightenment which transforms the thoughts of Chinese citizens. The role of enlightenment in the current China is fundamental in democratisation. Accessibility to the abundant and diverse information sources that the Internet offers has increasingly inspired Chinese citizens’ desire for the *right to know*. The interactive space for public expression that the Internet provides has encouraged citizens to embrace the *right to speak* and indirectly enhanced citizens’ constitutional demands for freedom of speech. The *right of assembly* is increasingly demanded through the pursuit of collective action. Many activists in my interviews were determined to bring enlightenment to Chinese citizens through mobilising civil action. As the citizen Kai believes, while there are ‘fake sleepers’ who have vested interests and pretend to ignore the dark realities, there are sleepers who need to be woken up. While critical thinking is the central concern in Harbermas’s account of the public sphere, enlightenment through online discussion is promoting a revolution of thoughts from which critical thinking may be nurtured in China. All of these changes hint at an answer to the fundamental question of ‘how does the Internet influence the establishment of a social foundation for democracy in China?’

Through public discussion and the establishment of a collective identity in a broad sense of community, civil power that opposes the state is being nurtured. There have never been mechanisms by which Chinese people can make the Party authorities accountable for particular issues, as is proven by the *Southern Weekly* Incident in which the central target of the propaganda minister did not give any comment or response to the public voices. The Internet in China provides a space where Chinese citizens constantly demand accountability from the Party by using various means of mocking, poking, and shaming to create a carnival climate that forces the authorities to take the voice of citizens into account. In a heavily repressive context like China, simply raising the voice is more transgressive than in other more liberal political contexts.

This research argues that the formation of a Chinese public sphere in the digital age is a process of information becoming more widely available, discussion becoming more active and desirable, critical thinking and democratic ideas becoming culturally grounded, and civil power becoming stronger. A Chinese public sphere should be studied as being ‘in formation’ which involves an information war. Information on the Chinese Internet is the cultural possession Chinese people created through the use of the Internet. The flow of information is how meanings are presented, cultural codes are exchanged, embodiment is mobilised, networks are established, and powers are strengthened and challenged. As Melucci (1996b) claims,
In complex societies, power consists more and more of operational codes, formal rules, knowledge organizers. In its operational logic, information is not a shared resource accessible to everybody, but merely an empty sign, the key to which is controlled by few people only. Access to meaning becomes the field of a new kind of power and conflict (p. 144).

This research creates a record of a long-term transformation in the making in China. I hope that this research contributes to an account of understanding the complicated cultural codes and rich meanings exchanged through a Chinese civil network. Rather than pursuing a political or ideological endorsement, this research displays human spirits in pursuing humanity, justice, beliefs, and meanings of their lives, and appreciates human's efforts to cope with challenges from powers.

During the time this research was conducted, many influential Chinese media corporations are arguably going through a bleak period. More and more Party officials were appointed to prominent posts in media corporations to directly regulate media. More journalists were detained for reporting on stories or issues that related to party officials. The number of influential journalists shifting to digital companies has been sharply increasing. The once shining Southern Media, adored by at least two generations of Chinese citizens, has in recent years maintained discreet silence in many social events and attracted much attack. Yet, Chinese media workers, who at various periods pursued journalistic idealism and were sympathetic about the suffering of the people, and Chinese citizens, who exposed incredible power of human spirits in the particular moments at the beginning of 2013, deserve not only a record in this research but also the promise of a longer term transformation.
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