A Study of Online Citizenship Practices of Chinese Young People

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Abstract

This thesis is positioned at the intersection between studies of citizenship in China and studies of the Chinese internet. It complements these two bodies of scholarship by investigating young Chinese internet users’ online engagement through the lens of citizenship practice. More specifically, it looks into young Chinese internet users’ online activities to understand how they practice their citizenship online and what these practices mean to them as citizens.

Thirty-one urban Chinese aged from 19 to 33 participated in the study. Online observation of participants’ social media homepages was carried out to collect data about their online activities, and internet-mediated audio interviews were conducted to explore their accounts of these activities. The results show that citizenship is practiced by participants online on two interconnected levels. The first is represented by their practice of online citizenship, defined by the norms and practices of the online community with which they engage. The second level is their practice of Chinese citizenship as it is manifest in their internet-mediated engagement with different social communities and networks.

On each level, the citizenship practiced by participants can be understood in three dimensions, namely: citizenship learning, identity formation, and action for social change. Their practice of online citizenship is a process through which they learn about the norms and language practices of online communities through engagement with these communities, form their identity as online citizens by aligning their online activity to accepted online practices, and contribute to constructing an equal and tolerant online space rich in reliable information and diverse opinions.
Participants’ Chinese citizenship was also practiced in three dimensions. First, it is practiced as a form of learning about Chinese society and their position in this society through internet-mediated social engagement. Second, their Chinese citizenship is practiced as identity performance, consisting of: 1) normalised identity performance on WeChat to consolidate identity in their physical lives, and 2) values-based performance on Weibo to form and maintain identity so as to navigate their lives in a drastically changing society. Third, their practices of Chinese citizenship are represented in their endeavours to improve Chinese society through internet-mediated social engagement. These practices are collectively shaped by three orientations of action, namely: angry youth, powerless cynics, and realistic idealists. These orientations are underpinned by the fluid and contingent subjectivity which unfolds in their engagement with the Chinese society which they experience in virtual and physical spaces.

In sum, young Chinese people’s online citizenship practices illustrate a notion of citizenship that is little associated with the state. It is more of a social and cultural citizenship defined by the norms and practices of the socio-cultural communities with which they engage in their everyday lives. These norms and practices were learned through, performed in, and shaped by young people’s participation in these communities.
Statement of authorship

This is to certify that

- the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD except where reference is made in the text;
- due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material used;
- this thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution; and
- the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, bibliographies and appendices.

Jun Fu

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Preface

An earlier version of some sections from Chapter seven of this thesis has been published as follows:

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Chapter 1 Introduction

The concept of citizenship itself is continuously broadened and deepened. It is broadened in the sense that citizenship is no longer limited to the nation state, but also relates to European citizenship and even global citizenship. There is a deepening of the concept, because citizenship no longer exclusively relates to the political level, but also extends to the social and the cultural levels and even to the interpersonal level – how people live together.

(Veugelers, 2011, p. 209).

Citizenship and young people

The concept of citizenship offers a useful framework for examining the relationship between individual and society (Arthur, Davies, & Hahn, 2008) and for understanding social groups’ struggles for public participation amidst rapid social change (Permezel, 2001). Contemporary concepts of citizenship, as a legal status in relation to a nation-state, have been challenged by a number of social and political conditions. For example, the global movement of people en masse and the emergence of transnational actors has had a disempowering effect on nation-states, undercutting the national sovereignty to which modern citizenship is configured (Banks, 2008; Joppke, 2010; Turner, 1993). The increasing diversity of nation-states raises complex questions for citizenship as a static status, posing the challenge of embracing the diversity of citizens while maintaining a set of overarching values and ideals that can be identified by those citizens (Banks, 2007). The dissolution of social rights associated with people’s access to public goods, and young people’s alienation from participation in traditional politics in developed western democracies, also challenge the defining features of modern citizenship (political and social rights) (Isin, 2008; Somers, 2008; Wallace, 2003). On top of these challenges, new opportunities afforded by the development of information communication
technology for people’s social, political, and cultural engagement also fundamentally challenge the concept of modern citizenship and its practices (Chadwick, 2006; Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015).

As a result of these developments, citizenship has become a contested concept which is “simultaneously expanding and eroding, becoming more inclusive and increasingly exclusive, in a variety of interconnected and multifaceted ways” (Livio, 2017, p. 2605). The extensive discussion of citizenship in various disciplines, such as sociology, political science, geography, and cultural studies, has broadened the debate on the meaning, significance and practices of citizenship, triggering a renewed interest in citizenship studies since the 1990s.

As young people represent the emblems of the future (Durham, 2008) and are the social group which bears the brunt of the transforming conditions defined by Isin and Turner (2002) as globalisation and post-modernisation, their experience and their practice of citizenship have become major concerns in the fields of citizenship and youth studies. Earlier research on this topic documented the decline of young people’s involvement in traditional political institutions, contributing to the depiction of young people as inadequately engaged with politics and as deficient in knowledge and skills for fulfilling their role as citizens. Pirie and Worcester’s (1998, 2000) survey of the “Millennial Generation” - the term they use for young adults in the UK who reached the age of 21 at the turn of the millennium - suggests this generation is less likely to vote in local and national elections than the population in general. The majority of young people in this generation feel they know little about their rights, responsibilities and the whole process of politics at the levels of their local council, Parliament, and the European Union.

Declining levels of young people’s participation in elections and party politics are also observed in other representative democracies, such as the USA (Dalton, 2009) and Australia
(Martin, 2012; Putnam, 2000). The data published by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) in 1999 suggest a consistent pattern of declining involvement of young people in electoral process compared to that of older cohorts in the USA, Russia, Western Europe and Latin America (IDEA, 1999). The story of civic deficit continues to be buttressed by young people’s declining news consumption and political knowledge levels demonstrated in more recent statistics and research (Pew Research Centre, 2007; Wattenberg, 2015). This leads to a perception of a crisis in the healthy functioning of democracies and generates waves of effort (reflected in policy papers, and various citizenship education programmes) to reconnect politics with young people, and enhance their engagement in politics (Alex-Assensoh, 2005; CAG, 1998; McLaughlin, 2000; Wilkinson, 1996).

This “civic deficit” narrative however was challenged by young people’s high turnout rate in several elections. In the 2008 United States presidential election, in which about 22 million young Americans under the age of 30 voted, the youth voter turnout reached 51 percent, a level that has not been seen since 1992 (Kirby & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009). The last parliamentary election in the United Kingdom also saw a greater involvement by young people, with approximately 62 percent of registered voters aged 18 to 24 casting a vote, the highest share since 67 percent voted in 1992 (Burn-Murdoch, 2017; Curtis, 2017). This is a significant increase from the low participation, at 40 per cent, in the early 2000s.

Later studies also question the “civic deficit” narrative by pointing out the fallacy of equating young people’s declining participation in conventional politics with apathy about politics and society (Henn, Weinstein, & Wring, 2002), problematising the narrow view of civic and political participation suggested by this narrative (Harris, Wyn, & Younes, 2007; Lister, Smith, Middleton, & Cox, 2003; Vromen, 2003). These studies argue that young people’s declining participation in mainstream politics is not a manifestation of their indifference towards social
and political issues, but a reflection of the weakening capability of traditional political institutions to address issues associated with today’s youth culture which celebrates diversified identity, privileges lifestyle politics, and concerns itself with local and global issues (Henn et al., 2002; Loader, 2007). The problem is “not political apathy, but alienation from the political system” (Sloam, 2007, p. 548).

These studies show that while young people may be alienated from traditional political activities they are actively engaged in a wide range of alternative civic and political activities which are informal, individualised and embedded in their everyday activities. They point to a shift of citizenship and political practice rather than a disengagement with affairs that are relevant to their lives. Dalton’s (2009) study of the citizenship practices of American young people suggests that young Americans are practising an engaged form of citizenship, manifested as non-electoral activities such as buying or boycotting products for political reasons and being active in civil society groups. In Australia, Harris, Wyn, and Younes (2010) examined the social and political participation of the broad “mainstream” of Australian young people who are between the two extremes of deeply apathetic about politics and unconventionally engaged. Their study found that these young Australians are engaged as citizens through informal, individualised and everyday activities, such as recycling, making donations, signing petitions, discussing political and social issues with parents and friends, and making statements through art, writing or music.

Jeffrey and Dyson (2016) describe everyday activities of young people in north Indian: helping local residents deal with state officials with regard to issues such as water and food supply, construction of infrastructure, schooling and health care. Through practising everyday forms of politics, these young people intend to conjure up avenues to changing the rampant fraud and corruption in local society. The data collected by the International Social Survey Programme
(ISSP) in 25 countries around the world also indicate that young people are actively engaged in non-institutionalised participation, such as signing petitions, donating money, boycotting products and attending political rallies or demonstrations (Marien, Hooghe, & Quintelier, 2010).

Among these emerging forms of participation, online citizenship practice is an important feature. As an integral element of young people’s everyday life, the internet has become a crucial venue for the spawning of new forms of citizenship practice (Bennett, 2008; Collin, 2008), while making young people’s online citizenship practice a topic of great importance (Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014).

The Internet and the citizenship practice of young people

Young people tend to be heavy users of the internet and related technologies in many societies (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011), with the internet playing an increasingly significant role in their social and political participation (Bennett, 2008; Loader, 2007). In the United States, while the overall percentage of Internet users among the adult American population reached 88% in 2016, internet usage of the cohort aged between 18 and 29 was near ubiquitous (99%) (Pew Research Centre, 2017). In China, there were 392.5 million internet users under the age of 30 by the end of 2016, accounting for 53.7% of the country’s total online population (CNNIC 2017).

The meaning of the internet for young people’s citizenship practice can be understood on two levels. The first is that the internet is a cure for young people’s alienation from conventional forms of citizenship activities. On this level, the internet is used as a tool to increase young people’s participation in traditional forms of politics and democracy by publishing information, offering online civic education, and providing online channels to reach young groups and enhance citizen-government deliberation (Brackertz, Zwart, Meredyth, & Ralston, 2005;
Dahlberg, 2001). Political institutions have been proactive in providing e-services on the internet to improve communication with young people and mobilise their participation (Chadwick, 2006).

However, because of its persistent top-down communication and adoption of dutiful norms of citizenship which tend to limit young people’s contribution to policy making, the effect of “e-democracy” or “e-government” as a cure for the declining participation of young people in conventional politics remains to be proven (Bennett & Xenos, 2004; Vromen et al., 2015). Just as opening more polling stations and providing multiple ways for people to cast their ballot have had little impact on the total turnout (Pirie & Worcester, 2000), to use the internet as the means of re-engaging young people with traditional politics may yield only limited outcomes in terms of reviving young people’s political participation: “the limitations of traditional politics have not been addressed by simply employing digital media strategies for communicating and connecting young people to political institutions and elites” (Collin, 2015, p. 11). In a similar vein, Dahlgren (2013) argues that more media do not necessarily lead to more democracy because addressing weaknesses in democratic systems involves more than media access and interactivity. Young people’s political engagement is not just a matter of “updating” one medium for another but of rethinking youth understandings and needs in relation to politics and citizenship in everyday life.

On the second level, the internet can be understood as a new social space and as a tool for grassroots civic activities. Research and discussion about the effects of its value for young people’s civic activities always reveal two perspectives. Firstly, the internet affords a space for generating and accessing information and expression. On the positive side, it provides an accessible way for citizens to contribute to and benefit from the diversity of online information and views (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013). Its less hierarchical structure provides new
opportunities for young people who are marginalised by mainstream political discourse to have their voices heard (Rheingold, 2008), providing a form of “networked citizenship” which is more inclusive and participatory than dutiful citizenship (Loader et al., 2014). It also offers an alternative source of news and information for young people when they are losing trust in traditional media (Bruter, Banaji, Harrison, Cammaerts, & Anstead, 2016). On the negative side, however, this allegedly free space for information sharing and opinion expression tends to replicate the offline power structures and create new inequalities based on users’ capability in using new technologies - it did not generate more inclusive and equal participation in public deliberation (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Collin, 2015; Vromen, 2008). There are also concerns about the reliability of online information in the absence of intermediation, and about the space being taken advantage of as a venue to promote antidemocratic information, such as xenophobic violence, religious sectarianism and extremism (Copsey, 2003; Farwell, 2014).

Secondly, the internet affords new possibilities for people to communicate and connect with each other. On its upside, it enables the development of new forms of sociality. It lowers the social and spatial barriers for participation so that people can connect with each other, perform and experiment with different identities, and form online communities to support maintenance of their identities (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Craig & McInroy, 2013; Johns, 2014). On its downside, however, the weak ties enabled by online communication may jeopardise the formation of strong ties that are necessary for the sustainable solidarity of a community (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). With this ease in communicating and connecting with others comes a tendency for people to seek out information that agrees with their existing views and to connect only with like-minded people (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013), which may reinforce their prejudices and leads to homogeneous and polarized online communities (Johnson, Bichard, & Zhang, 2009).
Thirdly, the internet affords a venue for political engagement, or at least contributes to the emerging ways of doing politics (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Banaji & Buckingham, 2013). This effect has been demonstrated not only by the role played by the internet in political movements around the world, such as the Arab Spring, the Occupy Wall Street movement, and the Umbrella movement in Hong Kong (Dahlgren, 2013; Lee & Ting, 2015), but also by studies of young people’s productive uses of the internet in their everyday practices of citizenship, such as participating and contributing to a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006, 2016), and practising a personalised and self-actualising citizenship through digital networking and consumer activism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009; Loader, 2007). The empowering effect of new media, as described by Banaji and Buckingham (2013), enables “young people to become the agents or authors of civic action rather than merely the objects of adult interventions” (p. 7).

Similarly, there are critics concerned about the effect of the internet on the practices of politics. Using the term “slacktivism”, some scholars question the real-life impact of “keyboard activism” or “one-click” approach to politics which they argue only works as a feel-good action for participants rather than addressing urgent social and political issues (Carr, 2010; Hindman, 2008; Morozov, 2009; Shulman, 2004). Other studies show that the internet is more likely to be adopted by those who are already politically motivated, rarely motivating those who are politically disengaged into civic and political participation, let alone supporting those who are from lower socio-economic backgrounds or who lack access to necessary hardware, infrastructure, and political and technical literacies (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2010; Dahlgren & Olsson, 2007; Loader, 2007; Vromen, 2008). In this sense, the internet contributes to normalising the inequality in participation rather than alleviating it.
Although the pros and cons discussed above elucidate the broad division of mobilisation versus normalisation (Hirzalla, 2010), or cyber optimists versus cyber sceptics (Norris, 2001), these positions are not necessarily incompatible. As efforts to find evidence of the effect of the internet, they are problematic in that they tend to isolate internet use from its social context (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013), especially when the online and offline spaces have grown into one lived reality these days (Dong, 2016); however, they are of great value in helping us to ask the right questions when examining young people’s everyday citizenship practices on the internet.

Banaji and Buckingham (2013) provide a useful account of the three key elements of online citizenship. The first is that the internet is not “a unitary phenomenon” but “a range of technological affordances, genres, and cultural norms each of which should be analysed in its own right” (p. 12). Studies of the relationship between these elements and young people’s social and political participation may lead to different results which can all be captured as the effect of the internet on their citizenship practice. These effects of the internet can represent opposite developments, such as mobilising new participation and normalising existing patterns of participation (Hirzalla, 2010), narrowing down the gap of social participation and creating new forms of inequality in social participation (Norris, 2001; Zheng, 2007). The diversity of these results indicates researchers’ focus and recognition of certain affordances, genres, and cultural norms which they think are more qualified than others to claim the likely effects of the internet on young people’s social engagement. More importantly, it demonstrates that the internet is not a unitary platform on which identical games are played by people at the same pace (Zheng & Pan, 2012); rather, it is a highly diversified, socially embedded space in which changing technologies interact with institutional and regulatory configurations (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001).
Secondly, *young people* as a socially constructed group should not be generalised or essentialised, and in particular they should not all be romanticised as digital natives. There is a temptation to homogenise young people as digitally-savvy, ubiquitously connected, and dependent on information technologies. The digital divides and other forms of inequality generated by structural factors are all replicated in their employment of the internet for civic and political activities. Thirdly, *online citizenship practice* takes different forms and occurs to different degrees. It can be conventional citizenship activities conducted in the online space, such as online voting and volunteering, or highly diversified engagement activities under the broad description of emerging or informal participation, such as signing a petition, creating artistic statements for civic and political causes, or participating in online discussion of a social issue (Jenkins, 2016). Citizenship practice online also varies in degree. One can be an online activist deeply engaged in initiating and mobilising social movements, or simply a participant who shows her support through liking or disseminating online content about the movement, or even a bystander who follows the development of the movement without taking any further action.

The above discussion emphasises that studies of the online citizenship practices of young people need to take into account not only the diversity of young people, but that of the Internet and of civic participation, and to understand online activities in the context of the social reality of young people in their engagement with communities in physical and virtual spaces. How do they practise their citizenship online? What do these practices mean to them as a citizen? And how do these practices shape their understandings of citizenship?

**Online citizenship practice of Chinese young people**

China is the world’s most populous country and a growing economic power. Its future is not only a concern of 1.3 billion Chinese citizens but also a major concern of today’s globalised
world (Osnos, 2014; Walcott, 2017). The study of citizenship in China provides a vantage point for understanding the changing relationships between Chinese citizens, society and the state, through which we can get a peek at its future. As a country with unique socio-political and cultural characteristics, citizenship in China is also a research topic of great potential in offering theoretical and empirical contributions to the field of citizenship studies.

In China’s long history of feudal monarchy, individuals were subordinates of the emperor. Although there were views in ancient Chinese history maintaining that people were the foundation of the state\(^1\), the ultimate purpose of these views was to maintain the rule of the monarchy. People in this monarchy were only expected to be - or educated to be - the loyal and obedient subjects of the feudal ruler (Zhu & Feng, 2006). The western concept of modern citizenship was introduced into China by intellectuals and political elites at the turn of the 20th century when China was at a moment of crisis due to foreign invasions and domestic rebellions. The introduction of citizenship was intended to help address the state crisis through raising people’s awareness of participation in civic and political issues to contribute to the revival of the nation.

However, a series of wars and revolutions occurring in China thereafter changed the relationship between the individual, the community and the state. The meaning of the concept has varied significantly as a result (Harris, 2002). The establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 signified an end to China’s turbulent modern history. In its early history (from 1950s to 1970s), the new government focused on consolidating the ideological and political control by the Communist Party of China (CPC), and establishing the legitimacy of the new regime (Fairbrother, 2004), the government thereby taking absolute control of society

\(^1\)For example, a statement in Mencius says: "To a state, the people are the most important. The state comes second. The ruler is the least important.” (民为贵，社稷次之，君为轻).
at political, economic and cultural levels, made China a highly suppressed unitary society (Wang, 2013).

The discussion and practice of citizenship only experienced a revival after 1978 when the party-state shifted its focus from class and ideological struggles to social and economic development (Chen & Reid, 2002). This switching of working focus has loosened social control, opening a series of channels for public deliberation such as public hearings and village-level elections. These channels, which operate under the umbrella term “deliberative democracy”, are encouraged by the government as institutions and instruments to maintain local order, address local community-related issues, and ameliorate people’s dissatisfaction with the negative consequences of fast economic growth, such as social inequality and environmental pollution (Leib & He, 2006). Although this form of deliberation provides a channel for citizens and social groups to participate in public policy making, its operation is still largely dominated by and under the surveillance of government authorities (ibid.).

In stark contrast to limited citizenship practice offline, young people’s online citizenship practice has a very different look. Thanks to the breakneck speed of internet dissemination in the past two decades, by the end of 2016 China had 731 million internet users spending 26.4 hours per week on average online, with 392.5 million of this online population under the age of 30 (CNNIC 2017). The internet has become a major venue for Chinese citizens (especially young people) to engage with various virtual communities and an essential medium through which they engage with Chinese society. Their online activities have significantly changed the relationship between nation and society, transforming the way Chinese people practise their citizenship (Meng, 2011; Yang, 2009; Zheng, 2007). Against this background, studies of online civic and political participation have become one of the focuses of citizenship studies in China.
The studies of online citizenship practices in China are mainly from two perspectives. The first, which examines online citizenship practices from a conventional political perspective, mainly concerns the encounter between Chinese internet users and the state. Typical subjects include how does the Chinese government censor online content, and how do Chinese internet users circumvent and challenge this censorship (Esarey & Xiao, 2008; King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013; King, Pan, & Roberts, 2017); online mobilisation and participation of collective actions (Liu, 2013; Zheng & Wu, 2005); and the implications of online civic engagement and activism to political reform and democratisation in China (Abbott, 2013; Jin, 2015; McDorman, 2001; Xiao, 2011; Yang, 2009) (see chapter 3 for a more detailed review of this literature).

The second line of research on this topic adopts a broader view of civic and political participation, focusing on how internet users experience politics and form identities through everyday online activities. In this vein, online citizenship practices are studied from social and cultural perspectives (Herold & Marolt, 2011; Marolt & Herold, 2014; Wang, 2015; Zhou, 2011). These studies include the investigation of the apolitical nature of Chinese netizens’ use of the internet, with a focus on entertainment, lifestyle and other personal issues (Liu, 2012), and the unique online culture generated by young people’s online participation (Meng, 2011; Szablewicz, 2014; Yang, Tang, & Wang, 2014) (a more detailed review of this literature is provided in chapter 3).

These studies shed considerable light on how citizenship is practised on the Chinese internet; however, the majority of them have stopped at the point of (partly) acknowledging this discursive online civic and political participation as an informal form of citizenship and demonstrating the potential of this form of citizenship, without further exploring the implications of these activities for the concept of citizenship. Moreover, these studies are normally interpretations of certain online events or cultural phenomena through a chosen
theoretical lens, not enough scholarly attention being given to understanding how Chinese young people, the generators of these events and phenomena, make sense of these practices. In the small number of studies that have taken young people’s perspectives into consideration, their subjects are mainly teenagers and university students. The cohort between the ages of 20 and 30 who are at their early career stage is less studied. This study intends to contribute to bridging these research gaps.

The aims of the research
This thesis is an exploratory study of online citizenship practices of Chinese young people. Through an inclusive framework of social and cultural citizenship, I examine young people’s everyday online activities through which they engage with social, political and cultural communities. It aims to explore how citizenship is practised online by Chinese young people in their everyday lives, and what these online practices mean to them as citizens. The inclusion of their perspectives in accounting for the meaning of their online activities represents an essential contribution to understanding the online phenomena which are extensively explored in the fields of Chinese internet studies, cultural studies, and media and communication studies.

My research questions are: 1) How do young people in China practise their citizenship online? 2) What do these practices mean to them as a citizen? 3) How do online practices shape Chinese youth’s understandings of citizenship?

The first question considers how Chinese young people conduct online activities through the framework of social and cultural citizenship. My exploration of their online citizenship practice is carried out across two dimensions which are embedded in the same set of online activities. The first dimension is their practice of online citizenship. In this dimension, their online activities are their engagement with the virtual communities on the Chinese internet. These activities, which are shaped by, and also shape, the norms and practices of these virtual
communities, enable them to experience a sense of belonging to this virtual space, that is, their online citizenship. The second dimension is their practice of Chinese citizenship online. In this dimension, the same set of activities can be viewed as their mediated engagement with their different social networks. Their practice of online citizenship is a subset of their practice of Chinese citizenship. Through this mediated participation, they experience a sense of belonging to different social communities which constitute their experience of Chinese society, that is, their Chinese citizenship.

As their online activities can be viewed as their mediated engagement with social communities on the internet, it is necessary to clarify my position in understanding the relationship between online and offline (or physical and virtual). Early research on cyberspace tends to treat online and offline spaces as distinct. Some celebrate the emancipatory effect of the disembodied communication enabled by this space (Robins, 1995; Springer, 1991; Turkle, 1995); others highlight the inauthenticity of this new form of communication (McLaughlin, Osborne, & Smith, 1995).

The distinction between online and offline spaces was proven to be unhelpful by empirical studies which showed that young people’s engagement in virtual spaces is deeply embedded in their physical context. In her study of young Americans’ social life, boyd (2014) argued that young people’s dependence on the internet for their everyday social practices is rooted in the lack of space for them to hang out with their friends. Their online interactions can complement or supplement their encounters in physical life. She also maintains that young people’s addiction to digital technology is not the cause of the decline in their social engagement, but rather it is related to the lack of opportunities for young people to participate in public life through which they could make sense of their position in, and their relationship with, society. Banks (2017) frames identities as a sophisticated constellation of ‘objects networked across
Carpenter (2012) argues that, unlike offline physical reality, online virtual space is “an alternate reality, an immaterial universe where time and distance cease to matter and disembodied minds are free to (re)fashion their identities at will” (p. 200).

In this vein, I see young people’s lives in virtual and physical spaces as mutually constituted rather than oppositional or unconnected (Valentine & Holloway, 2002). The reality experienced by Chinese young people is a “hybrid and fluid mixture” of actuality and virtuality (Ensslin & Muse, 2011, p. 4). The virtual is equally real, though not actual (Deleuze, 1994). This position helps to unravel the duality of the physical and the virtual, enabling a comprehensive examination of the interrelatedness of digital and physical contexts in the online citizenship practices of Chinese young people.

The second question further explores the meaning of online civic activity for young people. I identify three dimensions of young people’s meaning-making about citizenship practices online. First, online civic activities are the way they learn about the possibilities and practices of the social communities to which their online citizenship and Chinese citizenship are related. Second, these civic activities are also the process through which Chinese young people form their identity as a member of the social communities to which they want to belong. Third, these online activities are also the means through which they form their orientations and strategies for engaging with these communities, and through which they bring change to these communities, that is, their subjectivity formation and expression.

By contextualising the answers to the first two questions into the current Chinese social context, I argue that Chinese young people’s online practices, as a vital element of their social engagement, are crucial to them in learning about their social positions in Chinese society, in
forming and maintaining their identities in communities with which they engage in society, and in their endeavours to bring change to Chinese society. Their understandings of citizenship based on their online practices illustrate a form of social and cultural citizenship which is less related to the Chinese nation-state, and more involved with the cultural norms, discourses and social practices of the communities and social contexts with which they engage in their everyday lives. These communities and social contexts constitute the Chinese society experienced by them and to which their Chinese citizenship is related.

**Methodology**

This is a qualitative research based on observation of participants’ social media pages and analysis of internet-mediated audio interviews. Thirty-one young people between the ages of 19 and 33 were recruited through snowball sampling. All the participants are from urban areas of Mainland China and use Weibo and WeChat (two of the most popular social media platforms in China\(^2\)) on a daily basis. Their educational level ranges from professional college degrees to Doctoral degrees. Apart from five undergraduates and two first-year PhD students, all participants are in the early stage of their careers in a wide range of private and government sectors. Half of the participants live in rented accommodation in metropolitan cities away from their home towns and families. The other half live in dormitories on campus or at home with their families.

The data collected for this study is of two kinds. The first comes from observation of participants’ Weibo pages, the main venue for conduct of their online activities and where traces of these activities are found. I observed the visual style of their Weibo page and their setting of Weibo profiles. I also investigated participants’ activities on WeChat, but as the

\(^2\) According to the 39th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, Tencent QQ, WeChat and Weibo are the three most popular social media platforms in China. The reason for dropping QQ in this study was explained in chapter six.
content WeChat users share on this platform is only visible to their contacts, I did not collect the content participants shared on WeChat. I only asked them in the interview about the content shared on WeChat, their reasons for such sharing, and the meanings they derive from sharing on WeChat. I collected 20 pages (20 entries on each page) of Weibo posts in reverse chronological order from the day I received the address of the Weibo homepage of each participant. Using an inclusive framework of social and cultural citizenship, I screened and categorised their Weibo posts according to the properties of the community with which these posts were intended to engage. This analysis of their online posts gave me a general picture of participants’ online activities.

Since participants’ lives are an organic integration of their engagement experience in both virtual and physical spaces, the interpretation and understanding of their online activities need to be contextualised into the social contexts in which they occur. For this purpose, I used interviews to collect information about the social background of participants, such as their demographic information and internet habits. More importantly, the interviews were conducted to collect background stories, to establish the motivation behind their online participation, and to explore the meanings they derive from these activities. Using this online-offline combined approach, I aim to develop a contextualised and in-depth interpretation of my participants’ online citizenship practices.

**Three dimensions of citizenship practice**

My analysis and interpretation of participants’ online citizenship practices reveal three dimensions through which young Chinese internet users practise their citizenship and form their understanding of citizenship. These dimensions are interlaced in their online activities, working collectively in the process of defining their citizenship.
The first dimension is citizenship learning. Some studies assert that young people are disengaged from civic and political participation because they are deficient in knowledge and skills necessary for practicing citizenship, and citizenship education need to address this issue by preparing young people to be qualified citizens. This view of citizenship is based on the understanding of citizenship as a fixed status to be achieved. It draws an artificial line between citizenship learning and citizenship practice by treating young people as citizen-in-preparation and denies the concurrent and mutually constitutive nature of citizenship learning and practice. In this thesis, learning is understood as a process of engagement with different social communities which operate according to their respective practices. Through this participatory process, young people learn the practices of the communities by which their citizenships in these communities are defined and contribute to constituting these practices at the same time (Wenger, 2010).

Participants’ online citizenship practices through a learning dimension can be understood on two levels. The first is their learning of online citizenship through engaging with the Weibo community. This citizenship is defined by the practices of the Weibo community, such as language practices, expectations for users’ mutual engagement, and joint enterprise. Their learning of this citizenship is a reciprocal process in which they make meaning of, and contribute to shaping the practices of the Weibo community; therefore, it is not a passive process but a formative one which can generate new forms of citizenship practice. The second level of their citizenship learning online is their learning of Chinese citizenship through internet-mediated social engagement. By reconciling their learning about Chinese society through mediated and direct engagement, participants form their notions of Chinese citizenship as defined by the practices of the communities with which they engage in virtual and physical spaces.
The second dimension is identity formation. Identity is an essential dimension of citizenship in today’s post-modern and globalised world (Isin & Turner, 2002; Joppke, 2007). It has less to do with national polity than with discursive performance, acts through which individuals experience a sense of belonging in different communities. In this thesis, I understand identity as the product of continuous performative activities in response to the norms and discourses of a social context. It is based on the sense of belonging made possible by recognition from the audience in the social context.

Participants all attached great importance to building up an online image, an activity that could be viewed as identity performance. Like their citizenship learning, their online identity performance is conducted in two dimensions. The first is their performance of identity as an internet user, that is, their online identity. Participants conduct this performance by aligning their online expressions to the cultural norms and practices of the online community with which they engage. This performance, and the recognition it attracts from other members of the online community over time, forms their identity as a member of this online community. The second dimension of participants’ online identity performance is their online performance of identity to audiences from different social networks. This performance occurs concurrently with their performance of online identity. It is shaped by the norms and discourses of the social network to which the performance is directed. Participants in this study perform identities differently on Weibo and WeChat. Their performance of different identities across these two platforms is informed by two principles: 1) a reconstructed division between private and public; and 2) their appropriation of online space as a supplement to, or a means of achieving distance from their identities in relation to the pre-existing social network. These performances enable participants to experience different senses of belonging which are crucial in forming and sustaining their identities and which enable them to experience multiple citizenships in relation to different social contexts.
The third dimension sees Chinese young people’s online citizenship practices as their means of effecting social change. Their diversified online activities are generated by three types of orientations, those of angry youth, powerless cynics, and realistic idealists. They function collectively but vary in salience in shaping participants’ online activities directed at social change. Participants also employ definite strategies in pursuing these online social change activities. These strategies include: 1) bricolage, which means improvising using available opportunities and resources to generate action for social change; and 2) using self-interest as a disguise to avoid the possible attention of government authorities in response to their efforts for social improvement. It can also protect their motivation for pursuing such efforts from social suspicion which would erode fruitfulness of these efforts. These orientations and strategies reflect their subjectivities formed through engagement with different social contexts, and, in turn, shape participants’ further engagement with initiatives to bring change to these contexts.

**Road map**

This thesis has eight chapters. In the next chapter, I provide the theoretical framework of this thesis. This framework draws on the literature which extends the concept of citizenship from a static legal status to a reflection of social and cultural practices. It understands citizenship as a combination of the socially constructed, everyday activities through which individuals engage with different communities and which form their notions of rights, duties and identities in these communities. In this chapter, I also consider the concepts of learning, identity, bricolage and prefigurative politics which are closely related to the extended conceptualisation of citizenship. These concepts are used as theoretical tools to interpret Chinese young people’s online experience of citizenship.
Chapter three establishes the social context for my investigation of Chinese young people’s online citizenship practices. I first depict the social and historical context in which Chinese young people’s citizenship is practised, then I analyse the characteristics of younger Chinese generations born after 1980, since the participants of this study were chosen from this young cohort. The evolution of the meaning of citizenship and its practices in contemporary China are also reviewed before I narrow the focus to online citizenship practices. In the last section, I propose the research questions based on a review of current studies of citizenship practices on the Chinese internet.

In chapter four I explain the methodological and research rationale of the thesis. I see this study as a qualitative and interpretive research. It draws on online data collected from participants’ social media pages and the interview data which sought to understand the meaning of participants’ online activities from their own perspectives. I argue that this is the most appropriate way to address my research questions about the online citizenship practices of Chinese young people.

Chapters five, six and seven are my interpretations of the data collected about participants’ online citizenship practices. The meaning of their online activities as a citizen lies in three dimensions, namely citizenship learning, identity formation, and endeavours towards social change. I explore a particular meaning in each of these three chapters. In chapter five I develop my understanding of participants’ online citizenship practices as a form of learning. This learning is in a mutually constitutive relationship with the practices of the social communities with which they engage. In chapter six I delineate how online citizenship practices as identity performances contribute to the formation of participants’ identities in the communities and social contexts with which they engage in their daily lives. The continuous performances and
the recognition from other members of these communities enable different senses of belonging through which their citizenships are experienced.

In chapter seven, I examine participants’ online activities as their means of changing their society. I identify three types of orientations which collectively shape participants’ online activity, namely those of angry youth, powerless cynics, and realistic idealists. I also describe their strategies in conducting their online activities towards social change as a tactical response to the current Chinese social context. The generation of their online activities by these orientations and strategies suggests a fluid and contingent process through which they form their subjectivity in different communities, and express their anticipation for change in these communities.

In the last chapter I conclude by summarising the main findings of this thesis, stating its theoretical contributions, and discussing its implications for citizenship education. The chapter closes with methodological reflections and discussions of possible directions for further research.

**Conclusion**

To understand Chinese young people’s online citizenship practices, I adopt an inclusive framework of citizenship which views citizenship as an amalgam of socially constructed practices through which individuals engage with social and cultural communities and establish their notions of rights, duties, and identities in relation to these communities. As I will demonstrate in chapter 5, 6, and 7, Chinese young people’s online citizenship practices can be understood on two levels, their practice of online citizenship through engaging with the communities on the Chinese internet, and their practice of Chinese citizenship online, a form of internet mediated participation with social contexts which consist the reality of Chinese
society experienced by them. Their engagement with this reality is the process through which they learn about their relationship with and position in this reality, form their identities as a player in this reality, and pursue social change activities which are feasible within their subjectivities formed in this process.

The concept of citizenship, which provides a framework for understanding the relationship between young people, society and the nation-state, is crucial in understanding the interaction between China’s younger generations and the drastically transforming Chinese society. The study of online citizenship practices of Chinese young people can not only provide a vantage point for understanding the present and the future of Chinese society, but can also bring new understandings and ideas to the fields of citizenship studies, Chinese internet studies, and media and communication studies.
Chapter 2 Review of Literature on Citizenship and Citizenship Practice

Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical basis for this study in two steps. I first establish a conceptual framework of social and cultural citizenship based on the notion of practice; then I account for the key concepts closely related to this notion of citizenship which I use to interpret qualitative data about young Chinese internet users’ online citizenship practices.

The first part of this chapter builds a framework of social and cultural citizenship from the perspective of social practice. Drawing on my review of the literature in citizenship studies and education, I conceptualise citizenship as *a set of social practices through which individuals engage with different communities, and (re)construct their concepts of rights, duties, and identities in relation to these communities*. This framework extends the conventional frame of civic and political participation by including everyday social and cultural practices as citizenship practice, while making citizenship a theoretical lens for my investigation of young people’s online activities.

In the second part of this chapter I provide accounts of the concepts that derive from this framework of social and cultural citizenship. The first is learning as engagement with communities of practice. From this perspective, learning is a process of making sense of and shaping community practices through engaging with the community. The second is identity formation in a poststructuralist tradition. In this tradition, identity is formed through one’s continuous performance in social contexts, and through the recognition gained from others within these contexts. The concepts of bricolage and prefigurative politics which are evident in today’s youth politics are also introduced. These concepts are used to interpret the empirical data about young Chinese internet users’ online citizenship practices.
Conceiving of citizenship as a social practice provides an analytical tool that transcends the dichotomy of conventional and emerging ways of practising citizenship in order to examine young people’s online activities. I align this approach with a framework of social and cultural citizenship, understanding Chinese young people’s online citizenship practice in the three dimensions of citizenship outlined by Isin and Turner (2002): 1) learning about the rights, duties and possibilities of citizenship (content dimension); forming identities in relation to different communities (extent dimension); and participation in these communities to bring forth change (depth dimension).

**Citizenship status and rights**

Citizenship defines a relationship between an individual and their community in the broadest sense (Wiener & Sala, 1997). It gained its political and participatory property in the *polis* in Ancient Greece (Bellamy, 2008), and its contractual, legal status property between an individual and the state since the Roman Empire (Pocock, 1992). While the former emphasises equal and effective participation in civic and political activities for every citizen, the latter underlines the universal entitlement of citizenship as a legal status. These two understandings of citizenship highlight an inherent tension between the scale of entitlement and depth of participation (Bellamy, 2008). This tension was mitigated in the eighteenth century when modern states, of a viable size for a human community, were established, states which could balance the entitlement of citizenship status with equal participation of individuals with this entitlement (Bellamy, 2008).

A significant moment in the evolution of citizenship since the establishment of modern nation-states is marked by T. H. Marshall’s development of three dimensions of citizenship. In his seminal essay, *Citizenship and Social Class*, he laid the foundation for contemporary debate
about citizenship by defining citizenship as “a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community” (Marshall, 2009, p. 149). This status endows equal rights and duties to every “full member” of this community. In retrospectively examining citizenship rights in the UK from the 18th century onwards, he delineated the establishment of three types of citizenship rights in the UK. These rights include: civil rights for individual freedom which were associated with the courts of justice; political rights to participate in the exercise of political power which were associated with parliament and councils of local government; and social rights to access economic and social welfare which were closely connected to the education system and social services.

Marshall’s article has made at least two contributions to the development of citizenship in modern nation states. First, he established a basic ideal for citizenship development which still bears significant value for citizenship development today. This ideal was described by him as “a fuller measure of equality, an enrichment of the stuff of which the status is made and an increase in the number of those on whom the status is bestowed” (ibid., p. 150). I rephrase this ideal simply as “more (legal, political and social) rights which can be equally bestowed to more people”. He also noted that the acquiring of these rights is a contingent and continuous struggle of subordinate groups fighting for equal concern and respect from those in power.

The inclusion of social rights in citizenship status is the second contribution made by Marshall. He showed in his analysis that legal and political citizenship alone cannot address social inequalities such as different socio-economic status or lack of education which constrain the full enactment of legal and political rights of underprivileged social groups. To address this issue, he incorporated the idea of social rights in the status of citizenship as a mechanism for counteracting the inequality inherent in capitalism. Writing his article at the height of the
welfare state epoch, he was optimistic about the prospect of social citizenship “modifying the whole pattern of social inequality” and restoring social justice (Marshall, 2009, pp. 153-154).

It seems odd, and perhaps unfair, to criticise Marshall’s theory of citizenship for not being able to take citizenship beyond national borders into consideration since he clearly noted that the history of citizenship he wished to trace was “national” (Marshall, 2009, p. 149). It has to be admitted, however, that the notion of national citizenship was severely challenged by worldwide population migration (Benhabib, 2004), the establishment of international institutions, struggles of marginalized groups for social inclusion and recognition (Isin & Wood, 1999), and the emerging forms of citizenship practice enabled by new media and technologies (Loader, 2007; Vromen et al., 2015). All of these new phenomena demand a rethink of Marshall’s national citizenship.

**From legal status to social practice**

One way of rethinking Marshall’s national citizenship is to see citizenship not only as an entitlement from above but also the results of political struggles from below (Turner, 1990). Following this line of thinking, the development of citizenship is powered by and originates in people’s civic and political participation outside the traditional framework stipulated by the nation-state. The contribution of grassroots participation in shaping the characterisation of citizenship is well illustrated when the legal-status notion of citizenship under the authority of a state is contested and broadened by emerging civic and political activities, as it has been in the past few decades. These activities include a wide range of diverse struggles for equal economic distribution and recognition pursued by groups which are usually excluded on the basis of nationality, socioeconomic class, gender, culture, ethnicity and race (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Isin & Turner, 2002). To account for these activities, scholars in citizenship
studies point to a sociological dimension of citizenship which highlights its nature as a social practice (Isin, 2008).

Earlier efforts in this regard tend to underline the practice dimension of citizenship by acknowledging the input of citizenship practices in the formation of the terms by which citizenship is defined. Turner (1993) defines citizenship as “a set of practices (juridical, political, economic and cultural) which define a person as a competent member of society, and which as a consequence shape the flow of resources to persons and social groups” (p. 2). According to his argument, the “practice” dimension of citizenship can enable us to appreciate the contribution of political struggles from below, struggles which inform the dynamic social construction of citizenship. This dimension suggests the nature of citizenship to be a changing construction shaped by participatory activities, rather than a static and juridical concept (Turner, 1993). People’s citizenship practices in specific social contexts hence become the defining element of citizenship (Turner, 1997). Although membership is still a central element of Turner’s theory of citizenship, it is no longer simply “something” sanctioned by the state or community; rather it is a set of social practices in the state or community through which one’s membership is defined. In this sense, the nation-state model of citizenship is only one specific form of citizenship practice (Metz, 2010).

A similar argument is also made by Wiener (1997). In her studies of European citizenship, she suggests a socio-historical approach in analysing European citizenship, an approach that considers both the institutional elements of citizenship (a top-down approach) and socio-historically diversified practice (a bottom-up approach) (Wiener & Sala, 1997). Citizenship practice to her is a process of political participation which contributes to establishing the institutionalized terms of citizenship within a polity (Wiener, 1998; Wiener & Sala, 1997). It is how a person’s rights and duties in a polity or community are defined. It also produces socio-
cultural, economic and political mechanisms to guarantee individual’s equal *access* to conditions and opportunities for citizenship practice for contributing or shaping institutionalized terms of citizenship. Moreover, it enables a sense of belonging to community/polity (Wiener, 1997).

The practice dimension of citizenship underlined by Turner and Wiener has transformed citizenship from a static status, which defines the relationship between individual and state, to a dynamic process, which is shaped by individuals’ social and political participation in specific social and historical contexts. Their efforts in promoting the practice dimension of citizenship, however, are still somewhat dominated by the longstanding norms of citizenship as a status, and membership in relation to a political community. By “competent member of society”, Turner implies the existence of a standard that individuals’ practices (juridical, political, economic and cultural) need to achieve in order to be a citizen. In other words, citizenship is still a status defined by individuals’ practices (juridical, political, economic and cultural) up to a certain level. Wiener’s idea of citizenship practice offers a useful tool for contextualised investigation of citizenship development, but her argument was based on her analysis of citizenship practices in the European Union. Citizenship practices, for her, are about creating the institutionalised terms of citizenship within a polity. Her idea of citizenship practice therefore does not completely free citizenship from a legal status norm; it looks more to the past explaining how citizenship was established, rather than to the future of citizenship which is oriented to new ways of practising citizenship, especially at a time when new ways of practising citizenship enabled by new media and technologies are coming of age.

Despite the vulnerabilities in their accounts of citizenship as practice, these earlier efforts pave the way for the formation of a more inclusive and relational view of citizenship based on the notion of practice. This view of citizenship which I use as a conceptual framework for this
research is further developed by other scholars, such as Lawy and Biesta. Lawy and Biesta’s (2006) study of citizenship education in Britain suggests that the concept of citizenship is largely articulated in official policies and practice discourse by defining the status of a “good citizen” for young people. They argue that this has denied young people’s claims to citizenship by asserting a status differential between citizens and not-yet-citizens. This status differential is defined by official (state) views of what means to be a citizen, views which have more to do with what the state needs from young people than what young people want or need. Further, it posits the notion of youth as a political construction and a “product of state and government”, and positions this social group as a “threat” but also as the source of possible “renewal” for national aspirations (Mizen, 2004).

To address this problem, they propose the notion of citizenship-as-practice, conceptualising citizenship as a practice embedded in people’s daily life. This practice is interwoven and transformed over time through people’s participation in the actual practices which constitute different dimensions of their lives, dimensions such as family, schools, leisure, work, peer groups and the media. In this sense, everyone in society (including children and young people) are citizens who experience citizenship as practices that constitute their everyday lives. Their citizenship is “interwoven and transformed over time in all the distinctive and different dimensions of their lives” (Lawy & Biesta, 2006, p. 47).

Examining young people’s citizenship experience in their everyday lives in the UK, Lister, Middleton, and Cox (2005) refute the assumption of UK social policy that young people are a group in need of intervention to develop their citizenship. They show that young people are actively engaged in constructive community activities, often experiencing multiple citizenships simultaneously. Young people’s multi-dimensional, fluid and dynamic experiences and perceptions of citizenship highlight a “broad, fluid and inclusive understanding of citizenship”
The authors call for a more conceptually comprehensive model of citizenship which can take into account young people’s everyday constructive social participation. This inclusive view of citizenship, they argue, offers a framework within which young people can identify themselves as citizens. It also provides “a grounded perspective for understanding young people’s citizenship as being as ‘real’ as for other citizens” (ibid, p. 441).

This inclusive framework of citizenship based on the notion of everyday practice is upheld by a growing number of empirical studies which approach citizenship through examining people’s engagement with different social communities; they understand the concept of citizenship from the perspective of the people who engage in these participatory activities. Permezel’s (2001) study of people’s active engagement with Neighbourhood Houses (non-government community-initiated organisations located in urban streets throughout Australia) delineated the nuances of the “highly contingent experience of social membership” of citizens, nuances that are embedded in and affected by changing societies (p. 5). She found that people’s participation in informal, low-cost forums in urban streets enables them to learn the necessary skills and knowledge to participate in local organisations, to negotiate their identities as active and engaged citizen who are part of a community, and to facilitate a positive citizenship experience among other participating individuals with a sense of belonging to the local community and society. She maintains that their engagement with these organisations in local communities is an accessible and informal way for them to practise citizenship. She also argues that this informal means of citizenship practice within supportive social networks established in the neighbourhood context allows people who are segregated by certain social divisions to pass through each other’s doors; it facilitates the formation of communities of difference. In this way, those who are often excluded can experience their citizenship through becoming an active part of the heterogeneous public of Australian cities.
Metz (2010) investigates the gap between the declining citizenship participation documented in citizenship research and the high degree of citizen participation in the Netherlands. She argues that the gap was the result of the narrow framework of citizenship used by that research, a framework incapable of accommodating participation in the public domain. To reconstruct the picture of citizenship in the Netherlands, she proposes the theory of citizenship practice which “recognises different forms of citizen participation and communities as (part of) citizenship” (p. 67). This theory recognises all actors involved in community engagement as part of citizenship practice. Instead of stipulating the definition of citizenship, it lets individuals’ lived experiences in particular historical and social contexts define who is included as a citizen and what practice is counted as citizenship.

The acknowledgement of informal constructive social activities pursued by young people is especially important in ensuring the inclusion of marginalised groups as citizens - because “citizenship is partly produced by the practices of the excluded” (Sassen, 2005, p. 84). In her examination of emergent possibilities for citizenship practice in the city, Sassen (2005) argues that citizenship is affected by the position of different groups within a nation that are defined by age, race, ethnicity, religion, and other “identities”. Their practices and struggles have played a significant role in expanding inclusion and bringing about changes in the concept of equal citizenship. In this sense, citizenship is no longer merely a status bond with a polity, but also a construction arising from the participatory activities of individuals and social groups seeking resource distribution and recognition. Anybody who is politically engaged is practising substantive citizenship. This sociologically informed notion of citizenship places emphasis “less on legal rules and more on norms, practices, meanings, and identities” (Isin & Turner, 2002, p. 4). It provides a broader and more inclusive conceptual framework of citizenship in examining people’s social activities, and enables us to appreciate the diversified and changing landscape of citizenship practice which is discussed in the next section.
Changing practices of citizenship

The sociologically informed notion of citizenship discussed above makes emerging forms of social participation visible through the framework of citizenship. The change in the landscape of citizenship practice is particularly significant in three areas. The first significant change is embodied in emerging forms of engagement in communities on local and international levels. A typical example in this regard is the term “flexible citizenship” used by Ong (1993) to describe how affluent overseas Chinese, such as mobile managers, technocrats, and professionals seeking different locations for economic gain or political security, circumvent citizenship constraints through opportunistic searching for citizenship abroad and then through flexible leveraging of their multiple state citizenships. Flexible citizenship to Ong is a form of pragmatic practice for capital and power accumulation. Its practice is characterised by and managed through strategies for capital and power accumulation which favour “flexibility, mobility, and repositioning in relation to markets, governments, and cultural regimes” (Ong, 1999, p. 6). Her exploration of the lives of overseas Chinese living on the edge of different nation-states demonstrates that citizenship experience is now less confined by the local context or by national borders.

Sassen (2005) addresses the practice of citizenship in migrant groups. She examines the daily practices of undocumented immigrants, such as raising a family, doing a job, and participating in civic activities to maintain strong community ties. Her research shows that these practices, the same as those in which formally defined citizens engage on a daily basis, bind them to their communities of residence, producing “an informal social contract between these undocumented immigrants and the community”, and enabling an experience of citizenship (p. 80). She argues that citizenship practices in the post-national world (especially in global cities) are related to “the production of ‘presence’ of those without power” (p. 90). This presence is acquired in a broader political arena that is beyond the boundaries of the formal polity and is centred in concrete localities.
The second apparent change in citizenship practice is expressed in identity-based activities for rights, recognition, and social change. Unlike formal citizenship practices which tend to engage with political institutions directly, identity-based citizenship practices aim to affect the social institutions, discourses and norms which lead to exclusions based on socioeconomic status, gender, culture, ethnicity, nationality, race, and sexuality (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). Typical examples of these practices include the past and continuing feminist campaigns to break down the gendered construction of public and private spheres and to achieve equality for women’s participation in the public sphere (Arnot, 1997). Rosaldo, Flores, and Silvestrini (1993) explore how Latino immigrants in the US forge communities, claim space, and claim rights. Through forming community based on their shared culture, they embrace the undocumented immigrants who share commonalities of history, language and interest, and include them in a cultural community in which they can “emerge as subjects fighting for common interest”. In doing so, they reject the state-established boundaries that differentiate citizens and noncitizens, and contribute to reshaping rights, entitlements, and what it means to be a member of an ideal American society. These struggles for rights and social change along the lines of identities based on gender, ethnicity, nationality, race, sexuality, culture, and socioeconomic class revived discussion in citizenship studies about extending citizenship to an open stage for people’s performance of civic courage and identity (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006).

The third area of citizenship practice which has undergone significant transformation is related to young people. This transformation is observed through reflection on the “civic deficit” thesis which depicted young people as indifferent about institutional politics and ill-informed in playing the role of citizen (Harris et al., 2007). The social practice dimension of citizenship refutes this thesis by surfacing the diversified and discursive citizenship practices in which young people engage in their daily lives. The study by Biesta, Lawy et al. (2009) of British youth found that young people experience and learn citizenship through taking part in the life
of different communities. Their pervasive and elusive experiences comprise the multiple lines of their social acting and being, and represent the elements that comprise their understanding of citizenship. They are more concerned with local and personal questions that are directly related to their daily lives, those matters over which they are capable of exerting some control.

Young people’s citizenship practice in America follows a similar pattern of transformation. Dalton’s (2009) study of civic engagement of American youth shows that patterns of citizenship practised by young people in America are changing from duty-based citizenship to engagement-based citizenship. While the former promotes norms of loyalty and responsibility, and fulfilling duties like voting and paying taxes, the latter values independent and assertive citizens with increased political tolerance who are concerned for the wellbeing of others in the world. These citizens are willing to make an effort to improve their society and are more likely to directly participate in issues-focused political activities, such as a boycott or attending a demonstration to protest the war in Iraq. Dalton attributes the shift to changes in the values and norms that shape people’s conception of a ‘good’ citizen, while he confirms the significance of this shift for investigating young people’s citizenship practices.

A similar trend was observed in Australia. Martin’s (2012) study examined the extent to which Dalton’s “good citizen” thesis can be applied in Australia. The study shows that young Australians are much more engaged in non-electoral forms of citizenship practice such as protesting, petitioning and boycotting, while being increasingly disengaged from electoral politics such as through voting or joining political parties. The study of Australian youth by Harris et al. (2010) also shows that, while many young people are interested in social and political issues, they do not actively engage in institutionalised political activities. Instead of engaging with mainstream political institutions, which they found unresponsive to their needs and interests, young people tended to adopt “more ordinary ways to act on their political and
social concerns” (p. 28), ways which are informal, individualised and embedded in their everyday activities.

The change in young people’s citizenship practice is connected to the changing social and cultural context in which traditional political institutions have become less capable of addressing the concerns of today’s youth culture, a culture that celebrates diversified identity, privileges lifestyle politics, and is concerned about local and global issues (Loader, 2007). Coleman (2007) also maintains that the driver of “disaffected youth” is not young people’s apathy about politics, but arises from the failure of traditional politics to address the values, experiences, and concerns of today’s young people. On the other hand, the ubiquity of the Internet (especially social media) and its coinciding with this change in social context and youth culture have also played a crucial role in enabling and shaping new forms of citizenship practice (Bennett, 2008; Harris et al., 2010). I will review the studies of this form of citizenship practice in the next section.

**Online citizenship practices of young people**

Developments in information and communication technologies afford new possibilities for content generation and sharing as well as interpersonal communication and connecting. These affordances are widely employed by young people to mobilise protest movements across national borders and continents, and to form new political parties which reject traditional politics characterised by elites and hierarchical institutions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Sloam, 2014). The internet is also extensively used by young people as a space to express their political views and demands, document the political activities in which they participate, and initiate social movements such as consumer boycotts, protests, and petitions (Loader et al., 2014). The integration of these affordances into young people’s everyday lives has generated a series of
communication practices, processes and products which constitute new forms of citizenship practice (Enghel & Tufte, 2011).

A major group of the studies of these citizenship practices focus on the prominent, contentious political engagement fostered by the internet against the backdrop of young people’s declining engagement with traditional politics. Typical examples of these studies include Castells’ (2015) study which highlights the role of new media technology in providing organising infrastructure and a virtual space for protest movements in the Egypt, the Arabic world, and the US, and Gerbaudo’s (2012) analysis of the roles of social media platforms in organising a series of high-profile social movements, such as the Indignados movement in Spain, the transnational Occupy movements, and the Five Star Movement in Italy. In addition to these social movements, the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement in 2014 also caught significant scholarly attention. Lee, So, and Leung (2015) analyse the significance of digital media in providing platforms for the growth of online alternative media, and for the formation and sustaining of the insurgent public sphere in Hong Kong society. Lee and Ting (2015) investigated the skilful use of social media of a young activist group in disseminating information about the Umbrella Movement, building networks, and mobilising actions.

Another group of studies of the online citizenship practice of young people explores the online activities through which potentially socially marginalised individuals and groups form supportive communities, experience belonging, and strive for social recognition. The internet is used by sexual minority young people to form communities to explore their identities and advocate for changing the policies and environments of their schools to achieve recognition (Russell, 2002). Young Australian Muslims also use it for cultural production activities (such as music composing and creative writing), and for developing positive interactions with non-
Muslims. These activities help them make particular civic meanings of their religious and cultural affiliations (Harris, 2013; Harris & Roose, 2014; Roose & Harris, 2015).

Alongside the online activities of deeply engaged activists and socially marginalised groups, some scholars call for more attention to be paid to the broad “mainstream” of young people (Harris et al., 2010) and their citizenship practices in “more common and modest youth cultural spaces” (Harris & Wyn, 2009, p. 342). Harris et al. (2010) found that young people value the relationships and connections they forge on the internet. They feel comfortable expressing views and values in a broader and mundane sense, and also like to discuss social and political issues with their peers, and to network with them. These online activities enable them to experience a sense of social belonging. Young people also engage in ‘participatory politics’ in their everyday lives involving various kinds of cultural activities based on production and sharing of the material of popular culture and involving informal peer-to-peer civic learning across online media (Jenkins, 2016).

These studies contribute to the argument that the internet is fostering new norms or modes of citizenship practice. Bennett (2008) analyses young citizens’ engagement patterns in a digital age, describing it as “actualising citizenship” which favours “loosely networked activism” (p. 14) to address issues that directly relate to them or reflect their values. It is a personalised, discursive form of political engagement online which includes participation in local volunteering, consumer activism, boycotts, and transnational protest activities for environmental and human rights issues. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) use “connective action” to define the new norm of citizenship practice which is based on “personalized content sharing across media networks”. Vromen et al. (2015) also suggest that young people’s political participation in the digital age tends to be less institutionalised and more flexible. They are
more likely to engage with individualised forms of political activity that focus on issues they encounter in their everyday lives rather than seeking long-term organisational commitment.

Expanding concepts of citizenship

The studies reviewed above underline the need for an expanded conception of citizenship. This claim was made by Nicoll, Fejes, Olson, Dahlstedt, and Biesta (2013) in their paper *Opening Discourses of Citizenship Education*. They analyse the constitution and maintenance of current dominant citizenship discourses and explore how alternative conceptions of citizenship, encompassing participatory activities, can be understood. They argue that citizenship education needs to not only address the issue of declining conventional civic and political participation but also to explore where citizenship is practised, what young people are actually doing, and how young people can be supported both in their online social engagement activity and in using it for learning. They argue that the main barrier to answering these questions is the dominant discourses of citizenship which are defined by the legal status bestowed by a nation-state.

Using notions of *statements, conditions of possibility* and *power*, Nicoll et al. (2013) propose a poststructuralist theorization of citizenship which they argue can free concepts of citizenship from the constraints of normalised conceptions, and create spaces for capturing “the play of dominant and disqualified discourses ‘vying for legitimacy’” (p. 13). This theorisation emphasises the importance of local, empirical investigations of individual and collective social and political activities which would restore the nature of citizenship to a fragmented, dynamic, incomplete, discursive and heterogeneous concept. As a consequence, citizenship is expanded into a strategic concept for analysing participatory activities through which people claim their citizenship both as legal status and as political and social recognition (Isin & Turner, 2002). It concerns itself less with citizenship as a status and more with “the processes and practices that make someone a full member of a given community” (Lazar, 2007).
In light of the above review of conceptions of citizenship, I understand citizenship as *a set of social practices through which individuals engage with different communities, and (re)construct their concepts of rights, duties, and identities in relation to these communities*. A practice is a nexus of doings and sayings which consist of activities people perform on a daily basis (Schatzki, 2012). These activities are “intentional and voluntary” (ibid., p. 5). People conduct these activities for certain purposes and for deriving meaning. Practice is “spatially-temporally dispersed” (Schatzki, 2012, p. 2). The activities of which it is composed take place in specific spaces and at specific times (or in time periods). They are mediated by a person’s understanding of the social order, which includes power-relations, rules, norms and discourses; however, practice is created in response to the social order, not as an outcome of it (Wenger, 2010). It recognises individuals’ “capacity for invention and improvisation” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 13). In this sense, practice offers an analytical tool for us to transcend the agency–structure dichotomy as we examine young people’s online activities. It informs more sensitive accounts of these activities by recognising individuals as “active agents who make choices between the options that are available to them” (Martin, 2004, p. 89).

I name rights, duties, and identities as the three constitutive elements of citizenship. These elements embody people’s understanding of their relationship with different communities produced by their engagement in these communities and institutions, while shaping the way they participate in these communities in return. Citizenship rights and duties are no longer solely defined by the rights and duties stipulated in the legal documents of a state, but also constructed by the acts of undocumented or underprivileged actors to reshape their position by “acting as citizens” (Jakimów, 2017; Sassen, 2005). Their identities determine how they situate themselves in different communities (Conover, Crewe, & Searing, 1991). In this sense, citizenship is an “ensemble of different forms of belonging” (Isin & Wood, 1999, p. 21). The formation of one’s rights, duties, and identities in relation to different communities is a
contingent, seamless, lifelong process which involves continuous construction and reconstruction (Smith, Lister, Middleton, & Cox, 2005); it is not achieved but is a process of becoming, actively shaped by citizens themselves (Dahlgren, 2009; Jakimów, 2017).

In this study, the citizenship practices of young Chinese internet users are embedded in their participatory activities in various online communities. These range from browsing online news, setting up social media profiles, and sharing or generating online content, to participating in online discussions and mobilising collective action. In the context of this study, online citizenship practice can be defined more specifically in relation to a few concepts. The first is learning. From this perspective, citizenship practice refers to the activities through which Chinese young people make sense of the “internal logics” of online communities (Thomson, 2014, p. 73) that consist of norms, traditions, and other structural factors. Their engagement activities may include browsing social media, communicating with other users, observing interactions in online communities, using community lexicons, and figuring out the norms of a specific online community.

The second concept through which online citizenship practice can be understood is identity. From this perspective, citizenship practice is represented by the activities through which Chinese young people form and maintain identities. Typical activities of this practice include setting up social media profiles, expressing personal opinions or simply responding Like to the opinions of others. These activities show their identification with the values and cultural meanings upon which a community is established (Geboers, Geijsel, Admiraal, & Dam, 2013), functioning as performances through which they form and maintain their identities in relation to these communities. The concepts of bricolage and prefigurative politics are the third and fourth concept through which young Chinese people’s online political activities for social change are interpreted. In the rest of this chapter, I will account for the relationship between
these four concepts and citizenship, and elaborate on how these concepts are understood in this thesis given that they will be used as conceptual tools to interpret the empirical data about the online citizenship practices of young people in China.

**Citizenship and learning**

Citizenship, when understood as a status, tends to treat young people and children as non-citizens or semi-citizens. This position is reflected in the use of labels such as “Not-yet-citizens” (Lawy & Biesta, 2006, p. 43), ‘citizens-in-training’ (Anagnost, 2008), “partial” citizens (Chun, 2013), and citizens-in-waiting (Kennelly, 2011). Following from this understanding, the role of citizenship education is to help them to achieve the status of “qualified citizen”, one capable of enacting a particular kind of citizenship. This view of citizenship and the education which flows from it were criticised by Lawy and Biesta (2006) for negating young people’s claims to citizenship and diminishing the value of their daily social engagement as a means of developing their social and critical capabilities. Using the concept of citizenship-as-practice, Lawy and Biesta (2006) argue that everyone learns about citizenship through their daily engagement with the practices of family, peers, school, work and the media. Young people are not educated into citizenship, but learn to be citizens via their participation “in the actual practices that make up their lives” (p. 45).

Following this line of thought, studies of citizenship education tend to understand citizenship learning as a process concurrent with young people’s social engagement. Young people are citizens not simply because of the rights and duties they are entitled to have; they become citizens when they engage in social participation and democratic practices (Baker & B. Blaagaard, 2016). Their experience of citizenship in their everyday lives demonstrates a broad, fluid and inclusive avenue for learning about citizenship (Smith et al., 2005). The engagement of citizens in social communities provides a learning environment for them to explore and make
sense of the communities to which their citizenship relates (Hoskins, Janmaat, & Villalba, 2012); hence, greater recognition and support should be afforded to what young people already do as citizens.

As citizenship learning is inherent in people’s daily citizenship practice, it is no longer limited to a school subject or confined to a normal school setting, but embedded in people’s engagement in different social communities. This conception of learning echoes the theory of community of practice which is based on the assumption that learning occurs in the process of our engagement with social practices (Wenger, 1998). My analysis of the citizenship practice of young Chinese internet users as citizenship learning will draw upon the learning theory of communities of practice.

**Communities of practice**

The notion of communities of practice is predicated on the assumption that learning is not an individual process but a process of engagement with social practice (Wenger, 1998, 2010). Wenger (2009) defines communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p. 1). It is the place we develop, negotiate, and share our understanding of the world. Through our engagement in communities of practice, we learn the shared enterprises and practices of these communities, negotiate the meaning of our experiences, and take part in the (re)production of these practices. In this process, “the social and the individual constitute each other” (Wenger, 2010, p. 179).

Wenger (1998) defines practice as “doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do” (p. 47). It includes not only explicit embodiments such as “language, symbols, regulations, and contracts”, but also tacit elements such as conventions,
untold rules, recognisable institutions, underlying assumptions and shared worldviews” (p. 47). Since we participate in multiple communities of practice across time and space, Wenger uses the term “landscape of practice” to describe the “complex system of communities of practice and the boundaries between them” (Wenger-Trayner, Fenton-O’Creevy, Hutchinson, & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 13).

Although the theory of communities of practice provided a useful tool to examine learning activities (especially for those outside formal school settings) from a social perspective, it was also criticised for its position in approaching learning. One line of criticism states that, by emphasising the situational and social nature of learning, the theory tends to stand as the opposite of cognitive learning theories without acknowledging the fact that traditional cognitive learning theories do consider social factors involved in the learning process (Tennant, 2006). Cognitive structuralism, for example, claims that knowledge derives from activity, and is a heterogeneous construction. It was also criticised for leaning too far towards the social side of learning, leaving no space for decontextualised abstract learning or teaching outside a community of practice (ibid.). Another line of criticism argues that the theory of communities of practice tends to see communities as harmonious and accommodating, without paying enough attention to the issues of power which may exclude individuals from participating in social communities based on their knowledge of those communities, or exclude them because of other structural factors such as socio-economic status, gender, and race (Barton & Tusting, 2005). In addition, it is suggested that the theory has been transformed from an analytical concept to an instrumental one, that if learning through participation in communities of practice became a “design intention” or a “prescribed process” then it loses value in bringing social insights into understanding learning activities (Vann & Bowker, 2001).
As admitted by Wenger (2010), these critics help sharpen the theory of communities of practice, benefitting the researchers who use it properly as a conceptual tool. In this study, I draw on this theory to analyse the meanings participants make of their participatory activities in online communities, and how these meanings contribute to their learning of citizenship in relation to these communities. My focus is on using the theory to analyse Chinese young people’s citizenship learning based on their daily engagement with online communities and offline communities mediated by the internet. It is an informal and social form of learning that takes place beyond the typical school setting and that shares the assumptions of communities of practice about learning; therefore, critics of the weaknesses of the theory in accounting for formal learning and its usage, other than as an analytical concept, do not affect its application in this study. In regard to the critics concerned with the inadequate addressing of power issues, Wenger (2010) explained that they are not the focus of a learning theory, while admitting that power is inherent in learning and that they imply each other. This study testifies to this relationship. The issues of power did play out in my analysis of participants’ learning of citizenship. I will discuss these issues in chapter five of this thesis.

**Citizenship and identity**

Identity is one of the three dimensions of citizenship identified by Joppke (2007). It refers to “the behavioural aspects of individuals acting and conceiving of themselves as members of a collectivity” (ibid., p. 38). When citizenship is defined in this study as lived experiences that shape the relationships between individuals and communities of different kinds, it shares common ground with identity work which views citizenship as a discursive performative act involving identifying with different communities and experiencing a sense of belonging. As noted by Lepofsky and Fraser (2003), citizenship practised in post-modern or post-national society has shifted from being a given status to a powerful discursive mechanism that articulates identities through performance acts.
Against this backdrop, citizenship studies have expanded to cover people’s engagement with identity work in the context of multiple communities beyond national polities, encompassing global citizenship, environmental citizenship, digital citizenship, and a range of critical citi-zenships which focus specifically on exclusions based on gender, culture, and other structural factors (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). Since there are no legal and political institutions to account for and guarantee the implementation of these forms of citizenship, identity practice in relation to a certain community has become the core of these citizenship studies. Citizenship as a consequence has become a collective of different identities (Isin & Wood, 1999), and “a fundamental identity that helps situate the individual in society (Conover et al., 1991, p. 805).

This way, identities have not only been constituted as an issue of (and for) citizenship (Gray & Griffin, 2014) but have also become the source of momentum and the site for (re)defining and negotiating new forms and content of citizenship (Isin & Wood, 1999). Miller (1999) argues that citizenship can be understood as “an intersection of multiple individual identities”, “a relational outcome of interactions between individuals, communities, and institutions”, and “the site for the exploration of participatory engagement” (p. 24). Given this extended concept of citizenship which revolves around identity formation and the sustaining of individuals and groups in different communities, the identity work that people conduct in online communities becomes an essential part of the study of online citizenship practice.

**Understanding identity**

Identity as a concept has been approached differently within a wide range of disciplines - in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and linguistics, for example (Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011). In this study, I employ a social, subjectivist, and critical approach to identity, one which accords with the poststructuralist tradition of academic theorising. In this vein, scholars emphasise the “multiplicity, fluidity, and context-dependent operation” of identities.
In what follows I provide an account of how poststructuralist theorists understand identity and its formation for the purpose of using it as a lens to examine the identity operation of the young Chinese internet users in this study.

Foucault argues that our notions of self and others are established according to a framework constructed by pre-existing segregation and classification practices in our culture and society (Foucault, 1980, as cited in Cahill, Coffey, & Beadle, 2015). We learn the dominant/prevalent norms and deviations of our society and use them in turn as a mechanism of control to monitor our behaviours so as to attune to these norms, and we construct our sense of identity or concept of membership within certain categories. Foucault emphasises the social and relational nature of identity construction by highlighting the way in which identity is shaped through discourses. The discourses, which are defined by Cahill et al. (2015) as “the way in which stories, traditions, practices, ideas, and definitions operate to organise thinking and behaviour” (p. 303), function as a vital reference point according to which people tell what identity is “appropriate” to expect or from which they should deviate.

Building on Foucault’s work, Butler explores identity formation by problematising the binary notion of gender. She argues that “identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1999, p. 33). Performativity is the way through which ontological ideas and effects are established (ibid.). Our identities are not the external manifestations of our authentic ‘inner’ core, but made up and maintained by elements drawn from our discursive representations and repetitive performances (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009; Hey, 2006). In this sense, identity lies in “doing” rather than “being”. It does not exist behind or before our deeds but is constituted in these deeds (Wang, 2012). “We are who we play ourselves to be, and the more we play out ourselves, the more it seems true or natural to be who we are” (Cahill et al., 2015, p. 305).
Butler also notes that identity as a performance is not conducted in a vacuum. It is always “with or for another, even if the other is always imaginary” (Butler, 2004, p. 1). This means we make sense of who we are through our identity performance. In this performing process, we actively learn, take up, and perform according to collectively agreed social norms and discourses in order to be “normal” or “appropriate” (Cahill et al., 2015). This process of subjectification enables us to examine how we become who we are and what we are from a different perspective (Davies, 2006).

Because identity exists through performances, recognition of identity performances is another essential mechanism of identity within a poststructuralist tradition. Recognition focuses on the “interaction between audience and player where each party fulfils both functions of the observer and the observed” (Cahill et al., 2015, p. 307). Importantly, the performance and construction of an identity can be understood as people striving for recognition of their selves and of others. Thus, recognition revolves around a reference point constructed from people’s pre-existing ideas about the world, the self, and the other, ideas which include a set of beliefs, values and commitments, and a corresponding set of attitudes and dispositions (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009). It forges a division between us (who can recognise the doings of each other) and them (who cannot recognise each other’s doings) through the process of identification and disidentification (ibid.), making identity an ‘inherently social’ concept which thrives on both difference and similarity (Davies, 2006).

Submission to the generative power of discourse is however only one side of subjectification. Individuals do not uncritically adopt subject positions that are made available to them by dominant discourses. They form their identities through strategically positioning themselves in relation to others (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009). By differentiating subjectification from
socialisation - which focuses on how individuals are shaped by others - Davies (1993) renders the active side of subjectification. She argues that Butler’s subjects have agency (though a radically conditioned one) which enable them to “reflexively and critically examine their conditions of possibility and in which they can both subvert and eclipse the powers that act on them and which they enact” (Davies, 2006, p. 426). The formation of identity, therefore, becomes an “ongoing taking up and resisting of the various subject positions available within the discourses” (Cahill et al., 2015, p. 305). It is subject to the limitation of available subject positions made possible by dominant discourses within a specific social context, but still allows individuals to actively choose and negotiate their identities (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009). In this sense, identity can be understood as a fluid variable which changes according to different contexts and times (Gauntlett, 1998). Its formation is a non-linear and non-sequential process in which multiple identities are played out, and in which new identities keep emerging from the combination of different or even contradictory discourses (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009; Stokes & Wyn, 2007).

Moreover, the poststructuralist notion of identity formation argues that reconstruction of discourses is always possible through “practices of deconstruction, imagination, and resistance” (Cahill et al., 2015, p. 306). Identity formation therefore can be viewed as an incessant process of submission and subversion, one in which individuals critically examine the shaping nature of the discourses, the conditions of possibility which are available to or imaginable for them (Butler, 2004; Davies et al., 2001), and organizing new ideas and practices for society (Cahill et al., 2015).

**Digital media and identity**

The new possibilities afforded by disembodied online spaces and communication for identity performance are well documented in literature (Driver, 2006; Stern, 2008; Wang, 2012). Early
research on cyberspace tends to treat online and offline spaces as distinct. Some celebrate the emancipatory effect of the disembodied communication and identity performance enabled by this space (Robins, 1995; Springer, 1991; Turkle, 1995). Others highlight the inauthenticity of disembodied identities performed in this space (McLaughlin et al., 1995). It is important to state however that the distinction between online and offline worlds has been shown to be unhelpful by empirical studies which show that young people’s engagement in virtual spaces are deeply embedded in their physical context (boyd, 2014; Buckingham, 2008). Young people’s identity work in virtual and physical spaces is mutually constituted rather than oppositional or unconnected (Valentine & Holloway, 2002). These findings are supported by Banks (2017) who frames identities as a constellation of networked objects across virtual and physical spaces experienced by individuals. This approach unravels the duality of the physical and the virtual to enable a comprehensive examination of interrelatedness of digital and physical contexts in the construction and performance of identities.

Despite this development, empirical investigations of online identity work often default to the binary position of depicting online identity performance as an escape from marginalisation in the physical world (Driver, 2006; Johns, 2014) or emphasising the sustained power of physical, spatial, and social structural elements over identity performances online (boyd, 2014; Buckingham, 2008). In this thesis, I develop a contextualized understanding of Chinese young people’s online identity performance by considering the mutually constituted relationship between online and offline spaces. In doing so, I explore how online identity performance is employed by young people both as a supplement, reinforcing their identities in physical life, and as a way to distance themselves from pre-existing social networks. This contributes to the ongoing discussion about digital media and identity formation, and bridges the gap between the theory and practice of identity formation in young people in a digital age.
This contribution is underpinned by an analysis of the new resources and possibilities the internet affords for identity formation. The literature outlines two affordances of digital media that are closely related to poststructuralist accounts of identity formation. The first is the possibilities for identity *exploration and performance*. The anonymity of online communication and its ease of access make it possible for internet users to experiment with identity performances without being strictly constrained by physical, spatial, and social structural elements, such as age, gender, and class (Driver, 2006; Turkle, 1995). One can have more than one identity in an online community, engage in transgender play, or enact an identity which may be stifled in other settings (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Stern, 2008). Individuals can also generate self-representation using a wide range of media forms and in different online spaces (Montgomery & Gottlieb-Robles, 2013; Stern, 2008). The characteristics of online communication, such as asynchronous and re-editable online representations, control over audience of certain representations by “friend”, or blocking other users, allow more space for individuals’ deliberation and control of their performances (Hickey, 2014; Krämer & Winter, 2008; Walther, 1996). These features contribute to the construction of a friendly environment for people’s identity experiments and performance, leading to the formation of a rich repertoire of identity performances for people’s identity exploration (Weber, 2008).

The second affordance digital media provides for identity formation is the possibility of identity *recognition*. With digital media, people’s identity performances can reach a wide audience, either through their pre-existing social networks or via general online publics. The availability of the audience for identity performances plays an essential role in motivating people to perform and seek recognition of their identity online. These audiences, named by boyd (2008) as networked publics, can potentially provide social recognition and a source of identification, which is crucial for identity formation (Weber, 2008). Meanwhile, the response of these networked publics provides a stimulus for people to keep engaging in mediated identity
exploration and performance (Stern, 2008). The influence of recognition from online communities for people’s identity formation has been testified to by many experiential studies; for example, Driver’s (2006) study of virtual queer youth communities concludes that these communities can provide a sense of belonging for young people who are marginalised on the basis of their gender and sexual differences. Ghazali and Nor (2012) found that the internet plays a significant role in facilitating the identity processes of transsexual university students in Malaysia as male-to-female transsexuals. The study by McInroy and Craig (2015) also shows that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) young people can find support from their peers online and rehearse their desired identities online before undertaking them in offline life.

Citizenship and youth politics for social change

Citizenship as a practice is also a conduit to shape a new social order. It consists of civic and political activities through which people attempt to bring their desired social change. It has been argued that traditional forms of political participation are becoming less capable of addressing young people’s concerns in a more complex and uncertain world. This might present a picture where young people seem disengage from traditional formal political arena. Other line of enquiry suggests that young people tend to express their concerns about social and political issues in a wide variety of informal or alternative ways, such as recycling, signing petitions, or donating money to a cause (Harris, Wyn, & Younes, 2008; Loader, 2007).

Against this backdrop, recent studies of young people’s political participation have tended to adopt a broader framework of political participation which is beyond the institutionalised political arena and explores the alternative forms of political activity in which young people engage in society. These political activities include actors such as NGOs, citizens’ networks, social movements and activists (Dahlgren, 2013). Further, Bennett (2008) suggests new
patterns of engagement of young citizens (aged 18 to 25) through digital spaces, which he labels “actualizing citizenship”. This new engagement favours loosely networked activism to address issues that reflect personal values. People who practise this form of citizenship “may see their political activities and commitments in highly personal terms that contribute more to enhancing their quality of personal life, social recognition, self-esteem, or friendship relations, than to understanding, supporting, and being involved in government” (Bennett, 2007, p. 6).

The examination of Australian young people’s political participation by Harris, Wyn and Younes (2008) suggests that young people’s alternative political participation is focus on having a say in the places and relationships that have an immediate impact on their wellbeing, to produce places and relationships where they feel comfortable, belong, and where their voice and opinion is respected and valued. According to these researchers, young people tend to draw on personal resources (such as their relationships and the institutions that impact on their everyday lives) and personal strategies to create social change based on meaningful participation. Finally, Dahlgren’s (2013) examination of alternative political activities in today’s new media age suggests that young people’s political participation often takes personal forms and originates from the private sphere to impact then the public sphere.

The emerging forms of political activity sketched by studies reviewed above all feature informal activities directed towards the institutions and networks of their daily lives and seeking an immediate impact. These features can be captured in the strategy of bricolage and pre-figurative politics on which I will elaborate in the rest of this section.

**Bricolage**

Bricolage is a term used by French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss to describe the patterns of methodological thought. It can be understood on a technical and a speculative plane. The former concerns material manipulations or applications and has to do with results and projects,
while the latter is concerned with general ideas or theories, and involves ordering and explaining using intellectual tools either concrete or abstract (Hatton, 1989). Bricolage is understood in this thesis in its technical plane which means working with whatever resources are available to respond to events on an ad hoc basis and to get certain tasks done (ibid.).

One who performs bricolage is a bricoleur who works with his hands and uses circuitous or indirect means compared to those of a craftsman (Levi-Strauss, 1974). A bricoleur is a do-it-yourself person who makes use of tools and materials presently at hand to solve problems in a specific context (Hatton, 1989). The performing of bricolage involves reorganization or improvisation with existing elements to create new structures as an on-site response to a specific situation or event. Although bricoleurs’ ad hoc responses to their environment may improve over time, they are less likely to make an effort to develop new technical competencies and approaches to problems, or to seek new theoretical structures which could provide greater understanding of the problem. For bricoleurs, the key concern is finding a workable solution in a given setting with resources at hand. Their integration of resources is not for aesthetic or even efficiency purposes, and is not constrained by the conventional purposes of these resources (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Stinchfield, Nelson, & Wood, 2013).

The notion of bricolage has gained its presence in studies of political citizenship and digital culture in the past few decades. Deuze (2006) argues that in today’s individualised and flexible society, individuals are practising a highly personal “life politics” through which they identify with various issues, choices and lifestyles. They achieve meaning in their political citizenship by performing bricolage in their engagement experiences with multiple private and public spheres. By examining the ways in which people engage in the construction of the “highly personalized, continuous, and more or less autonomous assembly, disassembly, and reassembly of mediated reality” (Deuze, 2006, p. 66) on the internet, Deuze considers bricolage a
legitimate way for us to reflexively assemble our own particular versions of such reality, and maintains that it is a principle component of digital culture. The concept of bricolage is also used to capture the feature of people’s online identity work visible through flexible and creative use of digital media resources and the consumer culture items at hand to create online images suitable for certain purposes (Weber & Mitchell, 2008; Willett, 2008). I will use the concept of bricolage in chapter 7 of this thesis to examine participants’ strategy for pursuing online political activities for social change.

**Prefigurative politics**

Prefigurative politics, as defined by Boggs (1977), is “the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture and human experience that are the ultimate goal” (p. 100). Unlike traditional politics which normally involves direct confrontation with or protest against a dominant regime, prefigurative politics are manifested as young people’s self-conscious performance of the social change they want in their present lives (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2016). Foreshadowing the future in the present moment is the distinct feature of this form of politics. People who practise this form of politics are normally disappointed with the effectiveness of formal politics in addressing the social problems that concern them (Biekart & Fowler, 2013). They are willing to be agents of change on social and political matters. The sense of responsibility felt by them, arising from the belief that no one else will help (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2014), pushes them to act in the present to embody their vision of the future rather than passively waiting for the government or other political agencies to improve their social situation. By practising this everyday form of politics, they challenge the status quo on a mundane level and conjure up openings to change the system. The future, as performed in their everyday prefigurative political activities, is no longer a definite horizon in time, as is assumed in traditional political actions, but an emergent vision of the future precipitated by good actions performed in the present to slowly change society, a future that happens “from now on” (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2016).
Prefigurative politics is already evident in young people’s participation in social action around the world. In the Occupy Movement, for example, young activists were encouraged to construct camps to model exemplary society - a demonstration of future society-in-waiting - rather than make insistent demands for social and economic justice (Mitchell, 2012; Schneider, 2013). In northern India, young people are actively engaged in civic-minded everyday forms of action through which they undermine corruption, challenge injustice, and provide role models for others in society (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2016). This way of performing politics has also been observed in young people’s engagement in the World Social Forum, the Indignados in Spain, and the Arab revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East since 2010 (van de Sande, 2013).

Young people’s practice of prefigurative politics is rooted in the more uncertain social, economic and political spaces they are obliged to forge their futures (Harris et al., 2008; Mizen, 2004). Embedded on young people’s practices of politics is the advancement of new technologies that compress time and speed up society (Rosa, 2010), and to the predominance of capitalist institutions, policies and discourses that render the present as a site of self-realization (Jameson, 2002). This notion of prefigurative politics informs the analysis in chapter 7 of this thesis to examine participants’ online citizenship practice as a form of political action for social change.

**Conclusion**

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework and conceptual tools through which I examine and interpret the online citizenship practice of Chinese young people. I developed an inclusive notion of citizenship which defines citizenship as social practices through which individuals engage with different communities. This framework extended the notion of modern citizenship (a set of rights defined by the membership of a nation-state) to a social and cultural citizenship,
acknowledging people’s daily participation in social and cultural communities as active citizenship practice. This extended framework can effectively include emerging forms of social participation, such as online civic and political engagement, as citizenship practice, and makes citizenship a useful concept to examine the complexity of the online activities of Chinese young people.

I also accounted for the concepts of citizenship learning and identity formation through which young Chinese people’s online citizenship practices can be understood in three dimensions: citizenship learning, identity formation, political activities for social change. For citizenship learning, I argue that citizenship education which aims to cultivate qualified citizen who are capable of enacting a particular kind of citizenship is based on the assumption that citizenship is a status to be achieved; that is, the emphasis is on citizenship as an outcome rather than a process. This notion of citizenship negates young people’s claim to citizenship and denies their social engagement as citizenship practice. Applying an inclusive notion of citizenship can restore the learning nature of citizenship practice by recognising people’s everyday engagement with social and cultural communities as their efforts to learn about the norms and practices of those communities, and to work out effective ways of engaging with these communities. Following on this understanding of citizenship learning, I draw on Wenger’s (1998) notion of community to understand Chinese young people’s online citizenship practice as a learning practice through which they are empowered as competent and effective participants in their everyday online social engagement.

Identity is the other concept through which young Chinese people’s online citizenship practice is understood in this thesis. I embrace a poststructuralist tradition of identity. This vein of identity theory understands identity as a fluid, constantly changing and context-dependent concept formed by one’s performance in line with or in opposition to dominant norms and
discourses of a particular social community. This notion of identity provides a useful tool for interpreting their online activities across different online communities as performances for identity formation. These performances, partly shaped by the way they employ the affordances of digital media for identity work, is fundamentally determined by young people’s social position in current Chinese society, as well as by how they navigate their way in this society through engaging with different social communities, and by how they experience belonging in these communities.

For the dimension of political activities for social change, the concepts of bricolage and prefigurative politics are discussed. Although mediated by and occurring on the internet, their online citizenship practices in the context of learning, identity formation and political actions for social change are deeply rooted in their situation in current Chinese society. In order to develop a contextualised understanding of young Chinese people’s online citizenship practice, therefore, I will sketch the social context in which these practices occur in the next chapter.
Chapter 3 Citizenship in China

Introduction
This chapter provides the social and historical backdrop against which the online citizenship practices of Chinese young people are understood. In this chapter I review the social and political transformations in China since the liberalisation of the economic sector, particularly those that pertain to younger generations. The current generation of Chinese young people has grown up in material prosperity - particularly when compared to their parents’ and grandparents’ generations - and at the intersection of competing global and local ideologies and values. They also, face significant pressures from different institutions (such as family, state and society), and are immersed in increasing social uncertainty and confusion over the moral and political values with which they should identify. In this chapter I argue that Chinese young people have a strong need for civic or community engagement through which they can make sense of their position in Chinese society. Such engagement has the potential to help them experience a sense of belonging in a context of individualism within a fragmented society, and to offer the possibility of identifying with diverse social communities that can support them in navigating rapid social change.

Next, I review citizenship and its practices in China. This review reveals that citizenship in China has decoupled from the nation-state. Citizenship is understood increasingly as a more extended and diversified array of practices resulting from the loosening control of government over society and from the competing ideologies and values that coexist in that society. In tandem with the transformation of the meaning of citizenship, the practice of citizenship in China has flourished in the past three decades; however, considering that these practices are only conducted in the areas allowed and supervised by the authorities, the scope for citizenship
practice is very limited, particularly when that scope is compared to that of some Western progressive democracies.

Finally, I provide an overview of online citizenship practices in China. I argue that the internet, as an accessible channel and platform for grassroots participation, has become a vital form of citizenship practice. In this sense, the chapter also contributes to the fields of citizenship studies and internet studies in China, in particular by placing emphasis on young people and expanding the understanding of citizenship from the merely political to include social and cultural practices. This chapter, then, provides an analysis of youth citizenship and online practices, and their intersection in contemporary Chinese society.

**Contemporary Chinese society**

For centuries, China has been seen as a long-established civilisation with cultural traditions and Confucian philosophy and values embedded into its social structure. In the first half of the twentieth century, China went through a turbulent period of wars (both civil and international), revolutions, and changes of regime. This period of history was brought to an end in 1949 by the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), a regime of proletarian dictatorship ruled over by the Communist Party of China (CPC) (Zhu & Camicia, 2014). In the first three decades of the PRC, the new government focused on the socialist transition (Chen & Reid, 2002) and the consolidation of the ideological and political control of the CPC in China (Fairbrother, 2004). The country experienced several economic and political movements which had disastrous consequences for the economy, for politics, and for the traditional culture of the newly established Republic, of which the Great Leap Forward and the Great Cultural Revolution are the most notable examples. In 1978, the CPC shifted its focus from class and ideological struggles to economic development, instituting *reform and opening-up* as the two fundamental state policies of China (Zhu & Camicia, 2014). This shift represented the
beginning of a new stage of China’s economic, socio-political, and cultural development on multiple fronts.

In 1978, China started to develop a “socialist market economy”, opening the door to its rapid economic growth in the following three decades (Zhu & Camicia, 2014, p. 121). Since 2011, China has become the world’s second largest economy by nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (The World Bank, 2016a). People’s living standards have improved significantly. The average life expectancy of 67 for females and 64 for males in 1978 has increased to 77 and 74 respectively in 2014 (The World Bank, 2017). More than 800 million people have been lifted out of poverty (The World Bank, 2016c). However, the pure economic growth model has resulted in a litany of social and political consequences: enormous spatial and social inequality, environmental deterioration, government and corporate corruption, insufficient recognition of citizenship rights and benefits to millions of migrant workers, as well as severe social fragmentation, a deterioration in public morality, a decline of social trust, and distrust in institutions (Geis & Holt, 2009; Knight, 2016; Perry & Selden, 2010; The World Bank, 2016b; Zhou & Song, 2016).

During the same period, China has significantly increased its commercial, social and political interactions with the world. Its integration into the global economy has not only made the country the world’s largest trading nation (World Trade Organization, 2016) and an important player in the global economy, but has also brought diversified flows of information, cultures, and values from foreign sources into a Chinese society previously preoccupied with Confucian cultural traditions and communist ideology. In parallel with its facilitation of marketisation and internationalisation, the government has also maintained authoritarian rule through measures such as producing innovations in socialist ideology according to socioeconomic development, promoting Chinese traditional culture, and seeking to mitigate foreign influences (Zhang, 2004).
By doing this, it has sought to hybridise the ideologies of economic liberalism and political authoritarianism into what is officially called a “socialist market economy” and “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Zhang, 2004; Zhu & Camicia, 2014).

When decentralised economic management was interwoven with centralised political control and internationalisation and globalisation, Chinese society became marked by a series of polarised characteristics, such as rich and poor, modern and traditional, individual and collective, materialistic and idealistic, and global and local (Liu, 2011b). Scholars have understood the seemingly contradictory manifestations of Chinese society differently. Perry and Selden (2010) depict China’s social transformation since the late 1970s from three different perspectives. From the government’s perspective, China has transformed in ways that “accelerate economic growth, bolster party authority, strengthen China’s international position in the world economy, and overcome poverty” (p. 3). From the perspective of various social forces which engendered the reforms, the transformation may have enabled greater social autonomy and the flourishing of civic and economic activities which were prohibited by the government in the past. On the other hand, from the perspective of disadvantaged or relatively deprived groups, the transformations are perceived as “the preservation of party privilege and structures that work to the advantage of urban over rural citizens while radically increasing class and income inequalities and privileges of those with access to capital and to the levers of state power” (p. 3). Zhang (2004) identifies the three powers working for “socialism with Chinese characteristics” as:

- political exclusivism that is centred on the sole leadership of the party,
- economic pragmatism that promotes whatever means [that are] conducive to…economic growth…,
- and cultural particularism that addresses the problems caused by [a] moral vacuum at home and Western cultural influences from abroad (p. 290).
Yu (2009) observes that China, in the past three decades, is searching for a “continuity with, as well as a departure from, the socialist legacy and cultural tradition of the past, and integration with, as well as resistance to, global capitalism” (p. 6). Liu (2011b) uses the term “dual modernity” to describe the features of China’s transformation since 1978. She argues that this modernity is “exemplified in the twin emphasis on economic development and social control” (p. 206).

Taken together, these views of a highly complex and multi-faceted Chinese society can be understood as the result of the intertwined processes of neoliberal marketisation, a growth of the social sector, and people’s reconceptualisation of their relationship with the state, while at the same time a renovation of socialist ideology is occurring with a revitalization of certain selected traditional values by the CPC against the backdrop of accelerating globalization and a fading of feudal and Confucian values. These transformations have fundamentally changed the relationship between state and society, brought diversified values with which people can identify, and significantly reconfigured social structures and individuals’ relationships with the state and with society. All these effects have considerably changed the way citizenship is understood and practised in China, and it is a change that is especially evident among young people in China who have borne the brunt of this social transformation.

**Young people in China**

The current Chinese young generation in their 20s and early 30s were born after the launch of the reform and opening-up policy in 1978. They are normally referred to as post-80s/90s (balinghou/jiulinghou) after the decades in which the reforms began to create significant change (Moore & Chang, 2014). Growing up as China modernised and opened its doors, they had no direct experience of Mao’s socialism; they have only experienced a China with a booming economy and increasing material prosperity (Kloet, 2010; Liu, 2011b). They were
given more educational opportunities than their parents, and have developed a taste for a consumerist lifestyle (Yan, 2009). The one-child policy adopted in 1979 even enhanced their material wellbeing by making them the core of the family, especially in urban areas where the one-child policy was more strictly implemented (Jing, 2000).

At the same time, they experienced the popularisation of mass and digital media in an increasingly globalised China. This has made them media savvy, early adopters of new information and communication technologies. More importantly, it has exposed them to a diversity of information, cultures, values, and ideas from a global realm. Their consumption of foreign media content has provided them with new ways of thinking when making sense of their own society and lives (Wang, 2013). As Liu (2011b) summarises, younger generations in China have access to an expanded range of choices and possibilities thanks to their higher levels of education, access to rich media and cultural resources, and the material prosperity brought by a booming economy.

While benefitting from these privileges, the current young Chinese generation is also under great pressure from the drastic social transformations of the past thirty years. Fish (2015) notes that the liberalisation of the economy in China has brought insecurity to young Chinese since they are required to be responsible for their own welfare in an increasingly competitive, unequal, and unpredictable society. Kwong (2004) and Yan (2009) believe that the lack of an effective social security system provided by government has intensified this sense of insecurity. In parallel with this insecurity, Liu (2011b) notes that since most young people (especially those that live in urban areas) were raised in a relatively well-off material environment, and have been exposed to Western culture and lifestyles via media, their notions of the “good life” are more likely to entail a high standard of material success, placing increased pressure upon them.
Apart from the sense of insecurity and the pressure to achieve a high level of material success, family also plays a big role in Chinese young people’s lives. Due to a long-existing examination system for selecting government officials and civil servants in China, Chinese young people’s education was highly valued by their parents (Zhang, Chan, Wang, & Yang, 2015). As the only child in their family, they have consumed a significant proportion of their family resources for education and personal development. In this regard, their lives may be more of a ‘project’ worked on by all family members rather than a trajectory that is forged from their personal choices. As a result, Chinese parents have high expectations for the success of their children in education (Zhang et al., 2015). As Liu (2011b) affirms, today’s young people experience strong familial pressures to achieve certain educational and material success in order to fulfil their filial duty.

In addition to these pressures, contradictory values and ideological positions have presented even bigger challenges for the young generation. On the one hand, they were educated to be the successors of socialism, expected to have deep faith in homogeneous socialist ideology, and to be unconditionally loyal and submissive to the party-state and collective interests (Liu, 2008). On the other hand, the development of a market economy, together with popular culture, represent formidable challenges to socialist ideology, spawning a generation with diverse political and social values, eager to express themselves (Tian, 2009). Being caught in the crossfire of the competition between conflicting local and global ideologies and values, Clark (2012) and Kang (2012) note, young people in China are faced with a multiplicity of moral and political values with which to identify. Tu (2011) and Moore and Chang (2014) also argue that, in an increasingly diversified and fragmented society, as the dominant socialist ideology has lost its appeal, young Chinese have lost the “spiritual support” of mainstream ideology and values upon which their socialisation and identity construction might normally draw.
On top of these challenges, the personal and social development aspect of Chinese school curricula is widely regarded as being inadequate. The importance of attaining good results in College Entrance Examinations (*gaokao*) means that the education students receive before the tertiary level is generally exam-oriented. The highly regulated schedules of students in primary and secondary schools leave little free time for their socialisation (Wang, 2013). Lau (1996) argues that this form of education tends to isolate school from society and prioritise students’ performance in standardised tests rather than students’ personal and social development. It falls short of the quality of education that would equip them to navigate these complex civic issues.

Although citizenship education in China has transformed from pure socialist ideology education to a more accommodative form with content about self-development, personal wellbeing, and social and political participation included in the citizenship education curriculum (Law, 2006), critics argue that it does not sufficiently support the personal and social development of the younger generations. Ye’s (2011) study of citizenship education in China concludes that students’ capacity to practise their citizenship rights and participate in social activities is underdeveloped due to overprotective school systems and a lack of democratic space for citizenship practices in and outside school, as well as the paternalistic way in which most schools and families operate.

In a recent study of youth cultures in China, De Kloet and Fung (2016) identify three structural factors which both shape and challenge young people’s cultural practices. The first is party-ism, which is manifested as an ambivalent attitude toward the Party. People with this attitude are critical of the Party but unlikely to openly criticize it because they sometimes use a party membership as a cultural capital to gain an edge in job market. The second is familism. Despite a desire to be independent of family support and control, young Chinese people assign a high
value to the role of family, and this is especially the case for those who are the only child of small nuclear families. The last factor is pedagogy of the education they receive. This pedagogy focuses on academic achievement and future career success, allowing limited space for citizenship learning through engagement activities with communities in and out of school. The complex social space in which young Chinese reconfigure their identities is sketched by Wang (2013) as a mixture of urban spaces beyond the family control, capitalist spaces for the exploration of a consumer identity, and global spaces for exploring identity through Western narratives.

As a result of these structural factors, and contradictory values and ideological positions, China’s young generation appear to be marked by a series of contradictory characteristics. They are open to competition and willing to take responsibility for their wellbeing but, hesitant to face this challenge since they are not supported by an effective social safety net. They are educated to value hard work and plain living while being deeply affected by a social environment filled with rampant consumerism and materialism. They feel obliged to hold to socialist and traditional Confucian moral norms such as altruism, patriotism, and respect for parental authority, while at the same time strongly identifying with values such as individual rights and duties, social equality, social justice, and the rule of law (Liu, 2011b; Tian, 2009; Yan, 2009; Zhu & Camicia, 2014). They are eager to be independent and make their own choices, while still needing economic support from their families. They may take a cosmopolitan outlook while express strong nationalistic sentiments in the meantime (De Kloet & Fung, 2016). As Liu (2011b) describes it:

They are simultaneously materialistic and idealistic, instrumental and expressive, internationalist and nationalist, global and local, apolitical but nationalistic, modern and traditional, blessed with material prosperity and yet under great pressure to strive for greater material wealth, and exposed to an unprecedented range of choices and yet lacking a sense of security. (p. 182)
In sum, the current generations of young Chinese have access to unprecedented material resources as well as traditional spiritual resources, broadened choices and opportunities, while at the same time needing to negotiate a series of institutional pressures from family, state and society. Being trapped between the possibilities and the constraints of social structures, Chinese young people take on a complex and multi-faceted collective character, which combines a series of seemingly contradictory factors.

They have a strong need for civic or community engagement. This is partly because their engagement activities are essential for them to figure out the way in which Chinese society works and their position in and relationship to it. Moreover, their engagement in different social communities can fulfil a need to ‘belong’ in a context of relatively unsupported individualism in a fragmented society (Liu, 2011b). In addition to this, these engagement activities are the ways through which they construct and identify with diverse social communities which can support them to navigate a way of being in the complexity of current Chinese society produced by the interweaving of Chinese tradition, socialist heritage, and the diverse values introduced by China’s marketisation and globalisation (ibid.). As Kang (2012) observes, in multiple ways in everyday life young Chinese people are engaged in identity work that enables them to renew the connection between individual and society once the older connection defined by Chinese tradition and socialism has lost its relevance.

**Citizenship in China**

China has a long history of centralised feudal monarchy, under which individuals were the absolute subordinates of the emperor. Society was dominated by a state-centric and Confucianism-oriented ideology, with the role of education being consolidation of the leadership and interests of the ruling class (Law, 2011). The concept of citizenship was
introduced into China by intellectuals and political elites at the turn of the 20th century as a solution to address the state crises posed by massive domestic rebellions and the invasion of foreign nations (Culp, 2012). This concept, which originally focused on civic and political participation in a spirit of contribution to the rejuvenation of the nation-state (Zhou, 2006), continued to resonate as the concept of citizenship evolved in China despite the drastic political and social changes experienced by the country in contemporary history (Culp, 2012; Law, 2013).

After the Qing state fell in 1911, the Republic of China was established. The ruling Chinese Nationalist Party (CNP), endorsed a concept of citizenship which blended Chinese and Western political values and traditions. Typical elements of civic education then included moral cultivation (including Chinese ethics, patriotism, responsibility for society and nation), the legal system and economics, and historical and geographical knowledge about China and the world (Lin, 2005). This notion of citizenship was later narrowed to party-oriented citizenship after Jiang Jieshi became the leader of the CNP in the late 1920s. The party doctrines of the CNP were introduced into the school curriculum as a political subject in the late 1920s, while the civics curriculum was amended to reinforce people’s conformity to the nationalist ideology of the CNP in the 1940s (ibid.).

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, in order to consolidate the state, the new republic adopted a politically-oriented citizenship, dominated by nationally promulgated ideologies, which advocated citizenship values such as collectivism, patriotism, nationalism and self-sacrifice (Rosen, 1983; Zhu & Camicia, 2014). Although progress was made in terms of legalizing citizenship rights and duties, integrating concepts of equal rights and the rule of law into education, these efforts at citizenship development and education did
not make substantial progress (Law, 2006) since they were frequently interrupted by political movements that arose between 1957 and 1978 (Wang & Huang, 2008).

The year 1978 represented a new beginning in the development of citizenship in China. By adopting the *reform and opening-up* policy, the state led the country into a rapid process of modernisation and globalisation. In response to this process, citizenship in China has been depoliticised, becoming a diversified and accommodative concept reflective of its social and economic context (Goldman & Perry, 2002; Law, 2006). Apart from promoting typical citizenship elements such as ‘patriotism’, ‘socialism’, and ‘collectivism’, the state began to emphasise greater social and individual development (Fairbrother, 2004). This tendency was indicated in a range of policy documents as well as national curricula, such as in *Outline of Curriculum Reform in Elementary Education*³, *Outline of the national program for medium and long-term educational reform and development (2010-2020)*⁴, and *Curriculum Standard for the Subject of History and Society*⁵. In relation to social development, emphasis was placed on factors such as understanding of the law, moral quality, China’s political institutions and negotiated democracy, awareness of social engagement, and values of rights, freedom, and responsibilities (Law, 2011; Liu, B., 2012; Wang & Huang, 2008). For the individual, the curricula emphasised development and wellbeing, individual rights, self-esteem, character building and self-management, self-achievement, global perspectives, and psychological health (Keane, 2001; Lee & Ho, 2008; Wang, 2008; Zhong & Lee, 2008).

As well as the trends towards de-politicisation and liberalisation, Confucian and traditional Chinese values were retained in the concept of citizenship as a result of both their importance.

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⁴ Issued by the Communist Party of China Central Committee and State Council in 2010.
⁵ Made by Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China in 2011 and published by Beijing Normal University Press.
to cultural heritage and their official promotion. These elements emphasised self-cultivation through which an individual developed her “inner strength of assuming responsibilities for oneself, for one’s family and for society at large” (Yao, 1999, p. 37). In this sense, self-cultivation in Confucianism is expressed in notions of communal spirit, such as in consensus-seeking, deference to hierarchical structures in family and society, avoiding direct confrontation, maintaining social stability and harmony, and belief in moral governance (a strong government that rules with moral authority) (Zhu & Camicia, 2014). As a moral/ethical value system, Confucianism emphasises responsibilities over rights, family and communal interest over self-interest, and harmony over drastic social enhancement (Janoski, 2015; Lee & Fouts, 2005).

In addition to such factors, the relationship-based social fabric of China reveals more tolerance than in Western societies of a “relaxed” concept of democracy demonstrated by a responsive government ruling with moral authority rather than by a formal democratic system (Lee, Grossman, Kennedy, & Fairbrother, 2004, p. 29). This form of democracy has been encapsulated in terms such as “bargained authoritarianism” (Lee & Zhang, 2013) and “adaptive governance” (Perry & Heilmann, 2011). Lee and Zhang (2013) refer to “bargained authoritarianism” as a multi-pronged repertoire employed by the Chinese government for the management of popular unrest. These approaches de-politicise the confrontation between the state and society by allowing opportunities and spaces for citizens to bargain with local government for material concessions and symbolic rewards from the state. Perry and Heilmann (2011) use “adaptive governance” to account for the capacity of China’s bureaucratically fragmented policy mechanisms to adeptly adjust to the demands of domestic economic reform, receiving bottom-up input of knowledge and practice for the purpose of maintaining social stability and precluding revolutionary struggle.
These approaches to governance demonstrate the wide range of reactive and proactive operations and procedures the state adopts to preserve social stability. These operations and procedures depoliticise state-society confrontation, allowing citizens a certain degree of political leverage and relatively expansive, participatory opportunities to manoeuvre and bargain for material concessions and symbolic rewards from the state. Janoski (2015) describes China as a “partial citizenship regime… with a fledging civil society with many relatively new institutions and many old controls being exerted by the Communist Party of China” (p. 382).

Analysing citizenship education policy documents and curriculum standards from 1991 onwards, Zhu and Camicia (2014) identify nationalism, Confucianism, cosmopolitanism, and neoliberalism as the four most prominent discourses of the kind of citizenship promoted by the Chinese government. These discourses reflect expectations from citizens of a strong national identity, a sense of responsibility for self-development and their individual wellbeing, as well as that of their families and society at large, and the capacity to live and thrive in competitive local and international markets. This form of citizenship, as Liu (2011b) observes, aims to “incorporate both the qualities of the autonomous neoliberal subject in the free market and the communist-collectivist values of a socialist subject combined with Confucian self-cultivation and ‘traditional Chinese virtues’” (p. 29).

This perplexing transformation of citizenship has generated a range of understandings of citizenship in China. Lee and Ho (2008), for example, see the development of citizenship in China as a process in which socialist and collectivist ideology is retrieved from centre stage and integrated into the content and values of traditional Chinese moral ethics and other personal and social values, such as righteousness, civilized behaviour, unity, and concern for society. Tse (2011) maintains that Chinese citizenship is at “a half-way point between the old collectivist-paternalistic model and the free, autonomous citizen model” (p. 177). Kennedy,
Fairbrother, and Zhao (2013) observe that debates around citizenship in China are rooted in the departure of Chinese society from the state. The transformation of citizenship promoted by the state demonstrates the state’s effort to alleviate “the tension between a growing pluralisation of value systems among citizens and the state’s reluctance to retreat from its intervention into citizens’ private lives in contemporary society” (p. 229). Law (2006) depicts the transformation of citizenship in China as a shift from exclusive socialist citizenship to a more accommodative framework, integrating the roles played by the state under the CPC’s leadership, the market (as a lever of diversification and pluralization), society, and two regulatory forces (law as external force and virtues as internal self-impelling forces). To him, the concept of citizenship in China is a political-cultural struggle among these players from a multi-level polity in a global age. Zhu and Camicia (2014) argue that citizenship which combines discourses of nationalism, Confucianism, cosmopolitanism, and neoliberalism are the “technologies of governance” (p. 150) employed by the power elite in China to maintain the status quo and hegemonic control via “training an obedient and civically apathetic citizenry” (p. 143).

Although the above-mentioned views of Chinese citizenship do not share a consensus, they do share a recognition of citizenship in China having already decoupled from the nation-state as people’s dependence on the authoritarian state has substantially reduced because of the development of the market economy (Lee & Zhang, 2013). The transformation of citizenship in China is ultimately the outcome of drastic socio-political changes that have taken place in tandem with confusion over ideology and values in current Chinese society. The direction of this transformation lies to a large extent in the social consensus that is being reached through a re-examination of the values and discourses embedded in the notion of entitled citizenship by the state, as well as a re-examination of those values and discourses prevalent in current Chinese society (Zhao, 2013). It has become a constantly changing practice collectively shaped by specific political, socio-economic and cultural contexts as well as people’s engagement with these contexts. In this sense, the scope of citizenship studies in China, I argue, should be
extended to make sense of Chinese citizenship through examining people’s experiences of it in their everyday social engagements.

**Citizenship practice in China**

The introduction of market-oriented policies since 1978 has reduced people’s dependence on the authoritarian state and loosened the control of the government over Chinese society, creating new spaces for the practice of citizenship (Guo & Guo, 2015; Leib & He, 2006; Wan, 2004). In order to improve communication and to bring legitimacy to its policies and decisions, the Chinese government has opened up a series of channels for citizens’ deliberative and participatory practices over the past three decades. These channels include village-level elections, public hearings, nationwide petition institutions, citizen rights to sue the state, the publication of government information for public oversight, and acceptance of certain categories of NGOs and autonomous civil society organizations (He & Warren, 2011; Paik, 2012). Although there are huge disparities in terms of the extent and effectiveness of these channels being used by citizens in different regions for social and political participation, they provide important spaces for cultivating citizenship awareness, practising citizens’ participatory skills, and improving the transparency and accountability of the Chinese government (Goldman & Perry, 2002).

As well as through official channels, new forms of civic and political participation initiated by some voluntary societal actors have prospered in different areas. Grass-roots volunteering and civic associations have flourished (Shieh & Deng, 2011). According to estimation of Wang (2007) and Watson (2008), China has more than 400,000 social organisations registered with Civil Affairs, and the number of unregistered Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) or NGOs operate in the name of business range from a few hundred thousand to over a million. Strikes of factory workers for better wages and working conditions have increased significantly
protests in relation to environmental issues such as “Not-In-My-Backyard” protests have experienced an upsurge (Deng & Yang, 2013; Wu & Dai, 2014); and individual and collective protests for acquiring civil rights, improving transparency in public decision-making, and calling for government accountability have become commonplace (Guo & Dai, 2013; Guo & Guo, 2015).

Zheng and Pan (2016) categorize the citizen participation initiated by voluntary societal actors into two groups. One group composes of participatory activities occurring in the state realm. These activities, such as mobilising a protest against a governmental decision or petitioning for personal grievances, appeal to relevant state agencies and aimed at civically framed issues (e.g., food safety, local environmental issues). The other group consists of expressive and associational activities taking place in the societal realm. These activities, such as voluntary activities initiated by civic groups, do not target the state directly or expect immediate government response. These practices indicate the level of social diversification produced by economic development. They also shape and reflect Chinese people’s ever-changing understanding of rights, duties, and identities in relation to the state and the different levels of community.

As citizenship practices have opened up and diversified, they have attracted an increasing amount of scholarly attention. Goldman and Perry (2002) described a significant growth in citizenship literacy and the formation of collective identities, including citizenship practices of farmers, ethnic minority groups, and entrepreneurs. Chen (2016) outlines how Chinese factory workers are striving for their rights. Johnson (2010) looks at the different approaches and purposes of citizenship practices of environmentalist NGOs and NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) protests in dealing with environmental issues, while Wang (2017) examines civic awareness
among communities of intellectuals by looking at how social and cultural problems have been represented in the works of Chinese artists.

These practices have had a positive influence in various ways, such as in developing citizenship literacy, promoting inclusive and transparent decision-making, improving government responsiveness and accountability, and consolidating governance reforms; however, there is evidence that citizenship practices in China are seriously constrained by the social, economic and cultural context (Chack Kie & Ka Ying, 2004). Citizenship practices in China are largely dominated by government authorities, with deliberation through these channels “limited in scope and focused on particular problems of governance” (Leib & He, 2006, p. 269). Using the concept of a political opportunity structure, Zheng and Pan (2016) analysed the distributional patterns of opportunities for citizen participation in China. According to their observation, all forms of citizen participation in China, either initiated by the state or societal actors, are monitored and sanctioned by the state in the name of maintaining social stability. They argue that “citizens’ expression activities within the official sanction are a viable and significant mode of citizen participation” (p. 4). The study of social protests in China by Perry (2010) also indicates that rather than challenging the terms of state-society relations stipulated by political institutions, Chinese citizens have tended to negotiate with the state for better social and economic conditions using only the “rhetorical devices” allowed by the government. In other words, they are “playing by the rules” (p. 11). As such, citizenship is only understood in a restrictive way and practised in a relatively narrow sense (Wan, 2004).

Online participation as a vital citizenship practice in China

In contrast to limited citizenship practices offline, the internet has become a free and increasingly important space for Chinese citizens’ civic and political engagement. Since its introduction in 1994, the internet has penetrated China at ‘warp speed’. By the end of 2016,
China had 731 million internet users, while the internet penetration rate reached 53.2% (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2017). Because of the relatively limited channels available and the strict constraints on civic engagement in China, the internet has special meaning for people’s civic and political participation (Zheng & Wu, 2005). Compared with other formal and informal channels of civic participation, the internet has enriched and enlarged the information sources available to Chinese citizens, offering an easily accessible and less restrictive platform for forms of expression and public discussion. As a result, the threshold for citizens’ participation in social and political affairs has been lowered significantly, and the space for civic engagement of Chinese internet users has increased.

According to the 39th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, at the end of 2016 over 80% of internet users relied mainly on the internet for news. With over a million Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs) and about 220 million bloggers on the Chinese internet, each day over three million posts are produced by internet users in different online communities. Over 66% of Chinese internet users frequently place postings on various discussion sites to express their opinions and represent their interests (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2010). Through these online engagements, they have pursued a series of different citizenship practices, expressing concern about social and legal justice, rights, interests, and values. They also frequently participate in online activities to protect the environment and to supervise the operation of government institutions and the behaviour of government officials.

The internet has not only boosted the Chinese economy but has also changed the practice of citizenship in China. Meng (2011) affirms that the penetration of the internet in China has significantly transformed the way people conduct civic and political discussions. Zheng (2007) notes that the extensive adoption of the internet has changed the relationship between the
nation-state and society in China. Yang (2009) argues that the internet has given Chinese citizens a place to practise - and experiment with - an unofficial form of citizen democracy. In sum, whether judging by the population engaging in this form of citizenship practice, or by the actual effect it has had on the ways in which citizenship is practised, it is fair to say that online citizenship participation has already become a vital form of citizenship practice in China.

Due to the large percentage of the population engaged online, and the social changes (described above) that it has brought forth, online citizenship practice in China has attracted considerable scholarly attention. In this regard, studies can be roughly categorized into two types according to the theoretical perspectives from which scholars have chosen to approach the topic. I will elaborate on these in the next section.

**Online citizenship practice from a political perspective**

Studies of online citizenship practice in China tend to predominantly use a political lens. From this perspective, studies mainly focus on two subjects. The first is censorship on the Chinese internet. Due to the extensive practice of censorship on the Chinese internet (Jiang, 2010; MacKinnon, 2010; Tsui, 2001), anti-censorship behaviour of internet users has become a typical citizenship practice. Accordingly, many studies delineate the activities and strategies Chinese internet users employ to bypass, evade, challenge and resist the control of the Chinese government in censoring online content (Xiao, 2011; Yang, 2009). In exploring these issues of censorship and anti-censorship on the Chinese internet, many studies also examine the delicate relationship between government control of the internet and the online activities of internet users (Lagerkvist, 2010; Zheng, 2007). This research argues that the Chinese government has adopted a more flexible strategy in controlling the Chinese internet than through simply censoring and repressing online participation.
Besides controlling the free flow of some unfavourable information, the government also needs to use this platform to mobilise social support for its own causes so as to sustain the legitimacy of its rule. Online space for comparatively freer expression can provide a release for social unrest, which is beneficial to social stability (Herold, 2008). The public opinions generated in this space can also give external support to initiatives of reformers in the Chinese government (Fu, 2010; Zheng, 2007). Due to this subtle relationship between the Chinese government and internet users, Yang (2011) suggests that it is necessary to understand China’s internet censorship as a dynamic balance achieved through interactions among Chinese government officials, foreign internet technology companies, and Chinese internet users.

The second focus of online citizenship practice from a political perspective is its social and political effects. Some scholars believe that internet penetration is conducive to political reform and democratisation (Abbott, 2013; McDorman, 2001; Shirky, 2011). Improvements driven by online civic participation are observed in various contexts such as in the empowerment of the general public (Cheong & Gong, 2010; Lei, 2011; Shen, Wang, Guo, & Guo, 2009), the development of a public sphere and civil society (Herold, 2008; MacKinnon, 2008b; Yang, 2003b; Zheng & Wu, 2005), and in political openness, transparency, and accountability (Hung, 2006; Zheng, 2007; Zhu & Cheng, 2011). A slightly different approach in this context investigates daily discursive struggles of Chinese internet users through the framework of minimal politics, identifying strategies people use to contest official discourses (Gleiss, 2015). Reflections on these studies tend to argue that these effects could be undermined by factors such as irrational online public opinions and internet violence (Liu, Z., 2011; Wang & Bates, 2008), by the Chinese government’s proactive use of the internet, and by the commercialisation of new media (Latham, 2012; Zhao, 2008).
Apart from its effect on grassroots participation, the internet also changed the nature of party-state communication with the general public and facilitated their public deliberation. Since 1999, the State Council of China initiated Government Online Projects (Zhengfu Shangwang Gongcheng), requiring government at all levels use internet-based technology to reform social administration (Ma, Chung, & Thorson, 2005). To engage citizens in communication and participation in government administration and policies, central and provincial government websites provide services such as email to top officials and complaint box (Zhao, Alexander, Truell, & Zhao, 2015). The China Ministry of Supervision also provide the report fraud box on its website to collect citizens’ report regarding government officials’ corruption and other malfeasance (ibid.). The government also utilises digital communications, such as the use of Weibo by local government, and the online public consultation initiated by the National Development and Reform Commission for health system reform (Schlæger & Jiang, 2014).

Due to the contested nature of internet usage in China and the complexity in assessing its impact, some scholars argue that the impact of the internet need to be examined beyond the freedom/restriction dichotomy. Discussions of this issue should be based on investigations of people’s actual use of this medium (Zhou, 2006), and that specific political and social contexts need to be considered as well (Chi, 2012; Zhao & Leung, 2012). When a contextualised approach is adopted, scholars have tended to share the opinion that the effect of people’s online citizenship participation in China is more likely to be a slow, gradual evolution, rather than a democratic revolution (MacKinnon, 2008b).

**Online citizenship practice beyond a political perspective**

As research develops, scholars have become aware of the limitations of both a technical deterministic perspective and a political lens in studying online participation in China (Latham, 2012; Meng, 2010; Zhou, 2006). Studies of internet use and online content also show that social
and commercial uses of the internet are much more important for Chinese internet users than political uses (Damm, 2007). A plethora of research has started to explore the nature of online engagement from social and cultural perspectives. Some have investigated salient online phenomena produced by Chinese internet users, such as *E-Gao* (malicious prank) (Gong & Yang, 2010; Latham, 2012; Meng, 2009, 2011; Tang & Yang, 2011), *Renrou Sousuo* (cyber vigilantism) (Cheong & Gong, 2010; Herold, 2008; Wines, 2009), and *Wangluo Weiguan* (online surrounding gaze) (Du, 2011). Other studies identify the impacts of Chinese internet users’ online civic participation, including impacts on social identity and group norms (Wang, 2015; Zhou, 2011), political attitudes, trust in the media and the social system (Mou, Atkin, & Fu, 2011), as well as on personality (Wang, Jackson, Zhang, & Su, 2012).

Using the term “users” instead of “netizens”, Herold (2014) has argued that studies of the Chinese internet need to extend their narrow focus beyond the small cohort who are politically active. Herold and Marolt’s two edited volumes (2011; 2014) examined a wide range of online activities on the Chinese internet from a social perspective. Wang (2013) found in her anthropological study that the predominant purpose of Chinese young people going online is not political participation or entertainment, but to seek spaces to express and to socialise with people they do not know. The internet is used by them as a platform on which they interact with other young people, creating meaningful relationships, and form communities in which personal identities free from institutional control are created.

Only a small group of studies has framed online practices of Chinese internet users using the concept of citizenship. Yu (2006) refers to the participation of Chinese internet users in online discussions, petitions, and protests through which they influence public opinion, check

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6 The phenomenon of a large number of internet users showing their concern about some controversial social incidents through discursive activities online, such as commenting on news reports or participating in discussions about these incidents.
authority, and even challenge the political agendas of the government as ‘media citizenship’. This term implies that she only sees these internet users as citizens-in-preparation, comparing them to “fully informed citizens who are capable of open and direct political engagement with the state” (p. 304). Wu’s (2013) study of ‘cultural citizenship’ affirms the existence of citizenship practices in online discussions by analyzing a popular talent show in China. de Seta and Proksell (2017) investigate the role of selfies in reshaping the notion of citizenship of Chinese internet users.

Citizenship practices are also found in various online communities in China. Typical examples include information sharing and mutual support between young mothers in parenting discussion forums (Wang, 2003); Chinese gamers’ efforts to promote their rights against the pervasive discourse of Internet addiction and to forge cultural identity in online game communities (Lindtner & Szablewicz, 2011); activism in online backpacking communities seeking to address immediate social problems, bringing social justice and improving well-being within their sphere of influence (Zhang, 2014); and consumers’ participation in virtual communities through which they solve consumption issues and experience new modes of consumption (Huang, 2012). The implications of online participation for the development of citizenship literacy among Chinese internet users, such as increased awareness of social issues and greater capacity to participate in public discussion, have also been the subject of study (Hung, 2012; Svensson, 2016).

These studies shed considerable light on discursive and burgeoning forms of citizenship practised on the Chinese internet acting as a form of citizenship learning, identity formation and action for social change. They also demonstrate the necessity of a broader definition of civic and political participation in online activities that permits examination through the lens of citizenship. The majority of these studies however stopped at the point of (partly)
acknowledging this discursive online civic and political participation as an informal or non-traditional form of citizenship, or acknowledging that it demonstrated the potential of this form of citizenship. Very few of them have explicitly used citizenship as a conceptual tool for examining these activities and further exploring their implications for the concept of citizenship. A study of online participatory activities of Chinese young people through the lens of citizenship will therefore have significant value in understanding the meaning of citizenship in China and today’s post-national world.

Chinese youth and the internet

Although it is difficult to offer a precise description of China’s online population due to the anonymity of online communication, we may still get a general picture of this population by putting together related statistics with the image of Chinese internet users sketched in the literature.

According to the 39th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China\(^7\) released by the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) in January 2017, internet users aged below 30 accounted for 53.7% of the whole online population. The largest group by age is between 20 and 29 years old (30.3%). Students were the largest group in the online population (25%). Young people make up the largest group among Chinese internet users, especially when it comes to the social media in China. On the two largest social media platforms in China, Weibo and WeChat, young people are the dominant user group. By the end of 2015, 88% of

222 million monthly active users on Weibo are below 34\textsuperscript{8}, and among the 697 million WeChat users, 86.2\% are between 18 and 35\textsuperscript{9}.

Studies of Chinese internet users demonstrate a similar picture. In this literature, Chinese internet users are often described as well-educated young people who are actively engaging in diverse online activities (Pan, Yan, Jing, & Zheng, 2011; Qiu, 2003; Tang, 2012; Zheng, 2007). Lagerkvist (2010) and MacKinnon (2008a) observe that younger generations, the main force in the Chinese blogosphere, have exposed corruption and abuses of power of government officials, and have critiqued and subverted established patterns of thought and expression through creative satire. Scotton and Hachten (2010) and Lu and Pan (2015) also point out that young Chinese (as the main players on the internet) use the internet for news browsing, socialising with peers, and entertaining. Latham (2007) maintains that the Chinese internet has become the major vehicle of popular youth culture (such as online poetry and literature, gaming, animation and pop music) due to the extensive and active engagement of young people in online activities. Despite their status as the majority of Chinese internet users, young people in China are usually in a marginalised position in terms of being heard and participating in decision-making at school and in general society (Sima & Pugsley, 2010). When this situation is experienced by a generation with a natural closeness to digital media and an eagerness to express themselves, Chinese young people become the most active group in Chinese cyberspace, with the internet becoming the most important vehicle for their social engagement.

In sharp contrast to this extensive online citizenship practice among Chinese young people, studies of online social and political engagement specifically focusing on this cohort seems

only to have started to increase in recent years. Liu’s (2011b) study is by far the most in-depth investigation of the everyday online practices of urban young people in a Chinese social context. Other studies include quantitative research to identify the impact of young people’s social media use (Chan, Wu, Hao, Xi, & Jin, 2012; Wang et al., 2012), analysis of young people’s self-expression and identity exhibition in the Chinese blogosphere (Sima & Pugsley, 2010), a study of Chinese university students’ civic participation on social media through the theoretical lens of the public sphere (Lin & Starkey, 2014a) and a general review of the diverse online practices of Chinese young people (Wallis, 2011).

With a few exceptions, the literature on the online citizenship practice of Chinese young people has two weaknesses. First, it mainly focuses on teenagers or university students, offering few accounts of the online practice of the cohort who are in the early stages of their working life (Jin, 2015; Lin, 2016a). Second, updates are needed for this literature since the online practices examined in these studies have already been reshaped or even replaced by new forms of media and communication technologies. A recent review by Medaglia and Zhu (2017) shows that studies of online deliberation in China still mainly draw empirical data from BBS and online forums, phenomena taking place on contemporary, mobile-based, social media platforms are under-represented in existing literature. As new affordances are offered by the technologies, young people’s appropriation of these affordances in their everyday lives may generate a different picture of online citizenship practice.

To sum up, the literature on citizenship practice on the Chinese internet mainly examines internet users’ activities and the phenomena generated by these activities from political, social and cultural perspectives. These studies normally treat Chinese internet users as a whole, with only a few of them explicitly taking young people as research subjects. Moreover, since many of these studies are conducted through predetermined theoretical frames and from the
standpoint of an outside observer, they are often incapable of accommodating the perspectives of their young participants in articulating their understanding of the online citizenship practices of Chinese young people. On top of this, the online citizenship practices of the cohort aged between 20 and 30 remain largely unknown. An update on this group’s practices is needed in response to rapid innovation in media and communication technologies.

In order to bridge these gaps in citizenship studies of Chinese young people and Chinese internet studies, this study investigates the online practices of urban young people (mainly aged between 20 and 30) in China through the lens of citizenship. To free my study from the possible restrictions posed by the more traditional concept of citizenship, I have adopted a sociological and more expansive definition which frames citizenship as a set of socially constructed practices of people in dealing with their relationships with different communities in their everyday life. The two questions I intend to answer in this study are: 1) How do young people in China practise their citizenship online? 2) What do these practices mean to them as a citizen? and 3) How do online practices shape Chinese young people’s understandings of citizenship?

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have examined the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which Chinese young people are growing up and practising their citizenship. Growing up in a rapidly transforming society, Chinese young people have access to unprecedented economic and social opportunities, but they also continue to face significant pressures from family, state, and society, albeit not to the same extent as their parents’ and grandparents’ generations. As a result of these institutional challenges and new social opportunities, Chinese young people experience a tension between traditional socialist and Confucian moral norms and liberal individualistic ideas emanating from their unprecedented material prosperity. It is perhaps unsurprising that rapid social change in China stimulates in young people a strong need for social engagement
through which they can learn about their social position and through which they can experience a sense of belonging by connecting with their peers. Against this backdrop, the penetration of the internet in China (especially in urban areas) provides an easily accessible channel through which this need can be satisfied. The internet can become a major vehicle for young people’s social participation.

The rapid expansion of online practices in China has already had a profound effect on the concept of citizenship. From traditional conceptualisations of citizenship as a formally sanctioned status conferred by the state, to a practice of resistance to this state, digital platforms have opened up what it means to be a citizen. Furthermore, these online practices, and the meaning of citizenship, are constantly evolving. This dynamic process demands new understandings of citizenship and of young people’s involvement on digital platforms. It is this cohort to whom the future of China belongs, and to which we need to turn our attention in order to understand the opportunities and challenges that young people face.
Chapter 4 Methodology

Introduction
In this chapter I explain my methodological position and the specific methods and research tools I employed to conduct this research. Taking a qualitative and interpretivist research approach, I examined participants’ activities on Chinese social media and their accounts of these activities through interview. My observation of their online activities and their interview accounts enable me to gain an insight into their practice of citizenship on the internet, and to explore the meaning of these everyday online activities for them as citizens.

This chapter begins with an account of my qualitative and interpretive research stance informed by my conceptual framework of social and cultural citizenship and my research questions, articulated at the end of the previous chapter. I then move on to explain my reasons for choosing the specific methods I used to generate data, including collection of online archives through observation and internet-mediated audio interview. This is followed by a reflection on ethics-related issues and the impact my personal experiences might have had on constructing the research, choosing the methodological approach, and interpreting and presenting data.

The chapter then proceeds to describe the process of data collection, analysis and management. In this section, I provide a thorough description of the two social media platforms through which this study investigated participants’ online citizenship practice. Participants’ demographic characteristics are also provided in this section to support a contextualized understanding of their individual citizenship practice. In each section, I explain the decisions I made in the process of this research to build up a systematic qualitative study. In this way I unpack the research process so that others can assess the trustworthiness of the study (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).
Methodological position: qualitative and interpretive research

How a research study is constructed and carried out is correlated with how a researcher understands the core concept or issue of their research and what perspective(s) on this concept or issue she wants to investigate (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). In this section, I base my qualitative and interpretive research stance on an elaboration of my understanding of the concept of citizenship and on the perspectives of this concept that I wish to investigate in depth in this study.

Understanding of citizenship and qualitative research method

Citizenship in this study is understood as a socially contextual, relational and individual concept rather than a universal and objective one. People’s notions of citizenship, involving their understanding of rights, duties and identities, are established through their engagement with different individuals, institutions and communities. The society which shapes individual’s citizenship practice does not do so in the same way for every resident individual; individuals engage with different people, institutions and communities within the same society, experiencing that society in considerably different ways. Knowledge about citizenship therefore can only be generated by interpreting the visible representation of people’s participatory activities in the context of these societal factors.

This understanding of citizenship accords with the ontological position of qualitative research which acknowledges and values a subjective, contingent, contextual, and multiple view of truth (Leavy, 2014). It is an approach “committed to understanding social phenomena from the actor’s own perspective and examining how the world is experienced” (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2015, p. 3). It values the idea of going to the people (Taylor et al., 2015) and learning in the field (Rossman & Rallis, 2012), enhancing thereby the opportunities to understand the
motives, beliefs, and meanings behind the visible representations of people’s everyday practices (Flick, 2007; Taylor et al., 2015). To qualitative researchers, knowledge is a generative process rather than a causal process that “exercise an external influence on people” (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 3). In this sense, qualitative research is the appropriate way for me to gain an insight into the motives and beliefs behind the online activities of Chinese young people in different virtual communities, as well as illuminating the meanings they derive from these activities. These insights will inform my understanding of their notions of citizenship in relation to different virtual and physical communities in terms of rights, duties, and identities.

Research questions and qualitative research method

This study asks two questions which are best addressed using a qualitative research approach. The first question concerns how young people in China practice their citizenship online. For this question, I did not have any preconceived models, hypotheses, or theories about the citizenship practice of Chinese internet users that I wanted to test. I approached this question with an inclusive framework of citizenship and a guiding question (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). The research involved collecting the visible representations of the online citizenship practice of a small group of participants, such as archives of their social media homepages, and grouping this data into patterns upon which my development of concepts, insights, and understandings of Chinese young people’s online citizenship practice can draw (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Taylor et al., 2015). In other words, my way of approaching this research question is inductive. It is a common practice of qualitative researchers to develop concepts and understandings from patterns in the data (Taylor et al., 2015).

My second research question considers what these practices mean to them as citizens. This question can only be addressed by approaching my participants to establish who they are in their everyday lives, and examining their daily online practices in their specific social contexts.
The knowledge generated through this process is situated, partial and subjective due to participants’ different experiences of Chinese society. Qualitative research is especially relevant to this task therefore. Qualitative researchers, as Denzin Norman and Lincoln (2005) maintain, “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). This approach treats people, social settings or groups as a whole, tending to investigate them holistically (Taylor et al., 2015). Unlike quantitative research which aims for generalization and replicability, qualitative researchers believe that life occurs in the natural setting in which people live, such that a detailed understanding of people’s experience can only be obtained by exploring the complexities of individuals and their interactions with a specific setting. While the findings of this approach are not strictly ‘generalisable’, they can be widely applicable, and can contribute to the development of conceptual work. Furthermore, they can generate empirical and conceptual patterns that can be re-examined in further research.

To sum up, this study intends to understand the relational and subjective notions of citizenship revealed in the visible representations of participants’ online participatory activities. This way of generating knowledge shares a similar ontological and epistemological stance with qualitative research which sees the world as consisting of multiple truths that can be understood by researchers’ interpretations of the representations of different activities and perspectives. Moreover, by asking how citizenship is practised online by Chinese young people, and why it is practised this way, I intend to use these activities as an entry point to explore the motives, beliefs, and values behind them, and to interrogate the meaning participants bring to these participatory activities. This aim is best supported through the adoption of a qualitative research approach.
Research design

Consistent with the use of a qualitative research methodology, I employed two main research methods to explore and interpret participants’ citizenship practice as it is revealed in their different online activities. I firstly observed the visible representations or digital footprints of their participation in online communities, such as their profile settings on social media platforms, and their participation in discussion forums, or involvement in interest-based communities on social media. Since these activities are conducted online and represented mainly in the form of text (sometimes facilitated with emoticons, audio and video message), they are detached from the social contexts in which participants physically reside. In order to interpret participants’ online citizenship practices from the perspective of their everyday life experiences, I conducted interviews to collect participants’ basic demographic information and their accounts of their online activities. Below I explain why and how these two methods are used in this study.

Online observation

The study of a practice involves examining the activities of which it consists. Since online activities are evident in the traces and content internet users generate online, user-generated content is an important data source for studies of online activity. In this study, I use online observation to collect online content generated by participants’ activities in online communities. Observation is a major approach of ethnography, which is an holistic, interpretive approach to the study of the experiences, feelings and perceptions of people. Ethnography aims to generate understanding of shared practices in people’s activities, uncover the meaning people give to these activities, and to comprehend the interrelations of these activities, meanings, and social contexts (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012; Geertz, 1994). Ethnographers develop their understanding by using multiple methods such as observation, interviews and document/artifact analysis, and through use of a cultural lens which aligns to their research objectives (Fetterman, 2010). Observation as an approach of ethnography document actions
and interactions to understand practices and events occur in a specific context either from the inside as a participant or from the outside as an observer (Flick, 2009).

Online observation is a major data collection method in virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) which is also known as online ethnography, webethnography and netnography (Prior & Miller, 2012). It is a form of ethnography which studies the Internet “as a place or as a way of being” (Flick, 2009, p. 272). It focuses on “specific online communities through the observation and analysis of online dialogue and other online artefacts” (Prior & Miller, 2012, p. 503), aiming to understand people’s sense of self and the meanings they attach to online activities (Kendall, 1999). The emphasis of online observation is the ways in which people’s online behaviour arises out of their everyday experiences of interacting in a virtual world. Hewson (2007) describes online observational research as a method “which uses logs of interactions (typically verbal exchanges) between participants, as opposed to document analysis which makes use of static records constructed specifically for the purpose of dissemination via the internet, and whose primary purpose is not to facilitate an ongoing dialogue-type communication between individuals” (p. 416).

Online observers need to use the same services or applications as those utilized in the studied online practice (Skågeby, 2011). The data collected combines different sources of data about social activities on the internet, enables researchers to understand the nexus of shared community practice, culture, and the meanings people derive from engaging in this community (Boellstorff et al., 2012). User-generated information and media content collected through online observation can also be deemed as documents or archives. As a result, the boundary between the method of virtual ethnography and online document analysis becomes blurred. Drawing on the definition of Hewson (2007), I see my approach - collecting the data of
participants’ online activities - as online observation rather than online document collecting or archive downloading.

Although the data I collect through online observation is basically logs on participants’ social media pages, which is, to a large extent, the same as an online document/archive, the method I use is better captured by the term online observation for two reasons. First, the content participants post on their Sina Weibo\textsuperscript{10} (Weibo hereafter) page is the record and traces of their engagement with dynamic and changing virtual communities. It is part of an ongoing process rather than a batch of static and unchanged media content produced merely for information dissemination. Secondly, unlike document analysis which solely focuses on the “end products” of participants’ online activities, online observation allows more space for me to understand the records of participants’ online activities in the specific community in which they occurred. As the traces of participants’ engagement with online communities, this data is part of their dynamic online practice. It can only be interpreted as reflecting the dynamic interaction between individual activity, community practices and culture.

**Internet-mediated interview**

Early virtual ethnographical studies successfully established online domains as places worthy of serious scholarly attention through describing the rich and complex online social and cultural formations (Hine, 2008). These studies were criticized however for not considering the social, political and economic contexts of online activity in interpreting online activities (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Recent studies pay increasing attention to the generation and circulation of online content (mainly texts) as socially and contextually bounded practices. Moreover, researchers also found that some phenomena such as biographical process are difficult to observe, it needs

\textsuperscript{10} A Twitter like microblogging service in China, a more detailed introduction is provided in the latter part of this chapter.
to be supplemented by interviews of participants in order to reconstruct the contextual knowledge of observable practices (Flick, 2009). Interviews can also help researchers to avoid neglecting the taken-for-granted parts of culture that participants do not reflect on and provide indispensable opportunities for exploring and probing meaning making (Bourdieu, 1998). Therefore, an online-offline combined ethnography approach is employed by ethnographers to produce “holistic and situated studies out of the internet in people’s lived reality” (Dong, 2016, p. 4).

Drawing upon this development of online-offline combined ethnography approach in generating an interpretation of people’s online activities in their lived reality, I employed interviews to collect basic contextual information such as demographic details, participants’ work and current life situation, and details of their general internet habits. Moreover, I asked for the background stories, the motivations behind and meanings they attach to their online activities. By integrating the data collected through online observation into their lived reality, I aimed to develop an holistic and situated understanding of my participants’ online citizenship practices.

This online-offline integrated approach to studying participants’ online activities has other benefits. First, it complemented the information collected through online observation. Due to the absence of extra-linguistic cues and specific social contexts in online communication, some information which is crucial for understanding the nuances of participants’ online communication are missed (Hewson, 2014); for example, one of my participants once criticised the airport of his hometown for cancelling the smoking room without public consultation. The post of the critique reads as serious and formal, but through the interview I found that the post was not meant to be a serious critique about the incident but an intentionally exaggerated
expression of the participant’s dissatisfaction with the authoritarian way that government and business institutions do things.

Interviews with participants can compensate for this lack of information; it can collect contextual and background information about how, why and in what circumstances certain online activities happened. This information can help researchers develop contextualized understandings of participants’ online doings, and develop their own perspectives on the meaning of these activities. Secondly, this approach can strengthen the quality of online observation data through triangulation. Due to the anonymity of online communication, the authenticity of the data collected through online observation could be a concern (Prior & Miller, 2012). Interviewing participants about their situations in physical life to get background information about their online communication records can work as a way to triangulate the online data to help in ensuring the validity of online data (ibid.).

The online-offline integrated research design, using online observation together with internet-mediated audio interviews, not only allows me to explore the ways through which young Chinese practise their citizenship, but also offers insights into why their citizenship is practised in these ways, that is, it enables contextualized interpretation of these practices. In one instance, a participant once posted a sentence on Weibo that said, “thought I could bring this world a bit difference”. From the expression, I could only read a sense of frustration and disappointment, but the rich background information and stories behind this post that I heard in the interview enabled me to understand what change the participant wanted to effect, and why she felt frustrated. The answer to these questions shed precious light on how her engagement with society and her understanding of her relationship with that society changed over time, that is, it revealed her practice and understanding of citizenship.
Although this study benefitted hugely from interviews, I am aware of the role I play in the process of data generation. As a qualitative researcher, I use myself as a tool to conduct online observation and interview rather than working as a neutral researcher who collects quantitative data using well-developed survey instruments. In this sense, it is necessary to introduce my history and social position, and to reflect on the potential impact these factors could bring to this research.

**Reflexivity**

The processes of collection and interpretation of empirical data in any study are filtered through the researcher’s personal biography that is situated in a specific socio-political and historical context (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Rossman and Rallis (2012) see qualitative researchers as learners who construct understandings of their research topics through their own inquiry in specific social contexts. In this sense, the relationship between the researcher and those being researched, and the researcher’s reflection of this relationship captured in the term “reflexivity”, become major concerns. Recognition of reflexivity is not only crucial for a systematic and rigorous qualitative research, but also indispensable for a qualitative research study to be understood by its readers. Fine (2006, p. 90) argues that graduate students need to interrogate themselves: “why they are studying what they study; what in their own biography, curiosity or sense of responsibility spurs the questions asked” (Fine, 2006, p. 90). Further, Griffiths (1998) asserts that a thesis, a journal article or a book is an “act of communication” shaped by the researcher’s social position. For the reader, “knowing something about the [researcher’s] identity and intentions” contributes to understanding what it is that is communicated (p. 4). Below I present a deliberation of what I bring to this research and what impact my biography has had in the construction of this research.
As Bourdieu (1998) notes, people often fail to reflect on the habitual role played by culture in their account of their behaviour, therefore it is crucial to take into consideration the culture of the field in which informants reside. My Chinese background, and my competence in using the Chinese internet and understanding its culture, enable me to locate myself in the field (Hine, 2008) in which the activities I intend to investigate occur. It gives me an edge when reflecting on the taken-for-granted roles of culture (both Chinese culture and the online culture) as I interpret participants’ accounts of their online behaviours in interviews.

Born in the early 1980s in a small county in north-west China, I worked my way to big cities for higher education and work. As one of the post-80s generation, I grew up in the same social transformation process, and share the same features of the younger generations in China depicted in the previous chapter. I also faced and am still facing similar challenges and confusion as many young Chinese did or do, such as understanding my dramatically changing society, navigating my way through the contradictory values and ideological positions that co-exist in today’s Chinese society, and figuring out my position in and relationship with that society. This shared experience gives me necessary background knowledge, helping me to understand and interpret participants’ online experiences. With this knowledge, I am more capable of developing “empathetic understanding” of the online practices of Chinese young people (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002, p. 13).

Growing up in China means competence in using Chinese language, a competence that positions me well in undertaking this research. As a native speaker, I am fully capable of understanding the double meanings, metaphors, and slang in people’s daily speaking and online expressions. This capability enables me to conduct interviews in participants’ native language, and to understand their comments in the interview, and their online expressions, with confidence.
I have lived and received education both in mainland China (Lanzhou\textsuperscript{11}, Guangzhou\textsuperscript{12}) and overseas (Hong Kong, London and Melbourne). This experience provided me with a chance to look at China and Chinese younger generations from both insider and outsider perspectives. I was trained during my bachelor and master studies as an educational technologist. I am familiar with the characteristics and affordances of different media in supporting communication and connection, and am always curious about the passion of young people towards new media - the way they use them and the meanings they derive from their usage of these media.

I have also been an active user of the Chinese internet since 2000. I witnessed the development of the Chinese internet service from static webpage browsing, BBS, and instant messaging, to Weblog and the latest flourishing of social media services epitomized by Weibo (launched in 2009) and WeChat\textsuperscript{13} (launched in 2011). I started to use Weibo and WeChat in the same year as they were launched and have been using them on a daily basis since then. My experience of using the Chinese internet makes me a competent user of diverse applications and services. I am familiar with different platforms on the Chinese internet as well as the normative behaviours and users’ demographic features and practices on these platforms. This experience has familiarised me with the culture of the Chinese internet. I am a competent user of the evolving online lexicons, and familiar with the norms, rituals and dominant discourses in different online communities. This competence has enabled a nuanced understanding of participants’ online activities.

\textsuperscript{11} The capital city of north-west China's Gansu province.
\textsuperscript{12} The capital city of South China’s Guangdong province, a port city located in the Pearl River Delta, next to Hong Kong.
\textsuperscript{13} A mobile instant messaging service in China. A more detailed introduction is provided in the latter part of this chapter.
This familiarity can also be a disadvantage however. Due to my similar cultural background and experience of being a user of the Chinese internet, I could be seen as an insider of the cohort I intend to study. This cohort membership may jeopardize my sensitivity to valuable empirical data and certain social and cultural elements which might be helpful for interpreting such data. I am aware of the possible impact this membership could bring to my role as a researcher. During the process of this study, I did every interview with fresh curiosity and an open mind. The effect of my personal assumptions was minimised by my asking every interview question with humility and by consciously avoiding imposing my perspective on participants.

This research was partly motivated by my interest in understanding the ultimate purpose of learning and education. When I was trained as an educational technologist, I understood my duty as facilitating learning using technology. A natural question derives from this duty which could give meaning to my work as an educational technologist: what kind of learning and education am I supposed to facilitate? or simply, what is meaningful and valuable learning? This question led me to this study of citizenship through which I want to learn how young people appropriate the affordances of new media on their way to becoming a citizen.

**Data collection and analysis**

Qualitative research is based on a flexible attitude towards research objects as well as towards specific research methods. Qualitative researchers can be flexible in “approaching a field and moving in it, of understanding a subject’s or a field’s structure rather than of projecting a structure into what is studied” (Flick, 2007, p. 14); however, this flexibility needs to be leveraged according to “norms for acceptable and competent research practice” (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 60), crucial for constructing a systematic and trustworthy qualitative inquiry. In this section, I explain the basis for the decisions and adjustments I made during the process
of conducting this study. By doing this, I wish to help readers understand how this study was conducted, and to assess and critique the adequacy and trustworthiness of this study by themselves.

Selection of participants
There are 392.5 million users of the Chinese internet under the age of 30 (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2017). Their online activities on a vast variety of online platforms form countless online communities. It is beyond the capacity of a doctoral thesis to produce a representative picture of young Chinese internet users’ online citizenship practice. As a qualitative study, this study focuses on the depth of understanding of a small group of young users. For this purpose, I recruited 31 participants, aged between 18 and 33, who are users of both Weibo and WeChat (the two major social media platforms in China).

I determined this age frame because this represents the transition period of young people from higher education to work. In this period, they start to engage with more diverse social communities than those of their high school years, creating new social relationships and communities. In other words, this is when their citizenship starts to be practised in a broader social realm. A broader age frame might expose a fuller spectrum of their engagement with different social communities, and illustrate their transition experience as a citizen in various dimensions. I chose this relatively wide age frame also because I wanted to focus my study more on young professionals rather than the university student cohort (normally aged between 18 and 24) whose online practice has been closely examined in recent studies (Jin, 2015; Lin, 2016a, 2016b; Lin & Starkey, 2014b).

I obtained approval to conduct my research from the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (Ethics ID: 1443239). I started my recruitment by randomly sending out
invitations via private message to Weibo users who participated in online discussions of social and political news and issues published on Weibo. Since internet users generally have a low level of trust in the messages they receive from strangers, I only received two replies showing interest in participating after I sent out over 200 invitations on Weibo. In order to facilitate the recruiting process, I used snowball sampling. I sent a plain language statement and an invitation to participate in my research to four frequent Weibo users I knew in mainland China. Two of them are in Beijing\(^{14}\), working as university lecturer and manager of an educational company respectively. The other two are a high school teacher in Jinan\(^{15}\) and a reporter for a local newspaper in Guangzhou\(^{16}\). I asked them to introduce their friends who are both Weibo and WeChat users to me. In this way I recruited 29 participants, bringing the total number of participants to 31. Before giving their consent to participate in this study, participants’ rights were explained in the plain language statement. These rights were also explained at the start of each interview. They were clear about their right to withdraw at any time or to refuse to answer any question that they felt uncomfortable answering.

Participants’ ages range from 19 to 33, averaging 25.6. Their gender distribution is almost even (16 female and 15 male). All participants are from urban areas (the majority located in south and eastern regions), with 24 from tier one cities in China, three from tier two cities, and one from a tier three city, with the remaining three participants studying in Hong Kong, Korea and Canada respectively for their master or bachelor degrees. Twelve participants have a bachelor degree, 11 a master degree; five are college students; two have professional college degrees; and the 33 year old participant holds a PhD. Apart from the five undergraduates and the two first year PhD students, all the rest of the participants have just started their careers in a wide range of private or government sectors such as schools, hospitals, banks, government, and all

\(^{14}\) The capital city of China.
\(^{15}\) The provincial capital of Shandong, an eastern Chinese province on the Yellow Sea.
\(^{16}\) The provincial capital of Guangdong, a coastal province of southeast China, borders Hong Kong and Macau.
sorts of private companies (see appendix 6). Sixteen of them live in rented accommodation, seven live in a dormitory on campus, and eight live with their families.

The estimated amount of time participants reported that they use the internet varied from two to more than ten hours a day. All of them remain online during the daytime, and about half of the participants say they are online 24 hours. Weibo and WeChat are the two dominant social media platforms used by all the participants on a daily basis. Other internet services they use include QQ, Douban, News portals, and so forth. A few of them use Google search, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram via VPN on an irregular basis. Participants mainly use mobile devices such as smart phones, tablets and laptops to access the internet.

Because snowball sampling is based on the social network of researchers, participants enrolled through this method may have some homogeneity. The fact that participants in this study all received higher education and are working (or studying) in urban areas (mainly the south-eastern coastal area) of China indicates the similarity of their social and economic status to some extent. The research was not designed to be representative; however, I recognise that a highly heterogeneous sample may add extra difficulty to the interpretation of data, and become a barrier to the achievement of in-depth understanding of the research topic. The homogeneity of my participants in terms of their educational level and geographical location, on the other hand, may lead to more in-depth understanding of the online citizenship practice of a specific young group. In this case, the homogeneity enabled me to analyse themes in depth. Another benefit of snowball sampling is that it helps to establish good rapport between researcher and participant because of this referral relationship between friends. It is a relationship of trust that can enhance the depth and reflexivity of participants’ engagement with the research process to yield rich, honest, and high quality qualitative data (Hewson, 2014; Holloway & Wheeler, 2002).
**Online observation**

I chose Weibo and WeChat as the two sites for investigating participants’ online engagement activities. This decision was based on the fact that they are among the three most widely used social media platforms in China (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2017). Participants’ activities on these two platforms represent a large part of their engagement in virtual space. Another reason for choosing these two platforms is because the majority of their users are below the age of 35 (see the last section of chapter three). I did not choose QQ Zone - another social media platform whose popularity was second only to WeChat by the end of 2016 (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2017) - because it has similar functions and is provided by the same company as WeChat. It has been losing users to WeChat in recent years because WeChat has better support for mobile devices. Below I introduce these two platforms.

**Weibo**

Weibo is a Chinese micro-blogging service similar to Twitter. It is an open platform available both on computer (Figure 4.1) and smart phone (Figure 4.2). Users’ homepages and the comments they make are publicly viewable by anyone. It allows users to post text (no more than 140 Chinese characters), pictures, videos, and links to external web pages on their homepage. Although some posts and comments might be censored by the authorities after they are posted, writing posts or comments on Weibo does not need prior approval from any state or Party entity. In addition to basic functions such as like, retweet, following and hashtag, Weibo enables functions like threaded comments on feeds and private messaging between users. These functions allow various avenues of information dissemination and interaction between users.
Figure 4.1 Screenshot of Weibo on computer

Figure 4.2 Screenshot of Weibo on smartphone
Weibo is now the largest micro-blogging service in China, and one of the most influential social media platforms. Its users overall tend to be better educated young people from urban areas who are more active online than average Chinese internet users (Cairns, 2017). Since its launch in 2009, it has become a major avenue for news delivery (Wang, 2015). As an alternative to official media for news and as a platform for participatory journalism, Weibo is extensively used by Chinese citizens for news consumption and participation in discussion about social and political issues (Negro, 2017a). Users on Weibo are inclined to follow news agencies, celebrities, and experts in their field, and to pay less attention to the content generated by their friends and acquaintances in physical life (Zhang & Pentina, 2012).

Thanks to the influence of the opinion leaders registered on this platform and the engagement of their huge number of followers, Weibo has become a potent incubator for grassroots civic and political participation. It ranges from outing corrupt officials and generating subversive memes to protesting about polluting plants and boycotting the ivory trade (DeLuca, Brunner, & Sun, 2016). The engagement of opinions leaders and other users on Weibo plays a significant role in setting the public agenda (Negro, 2017a). Du (2011) argues that Weibo, functioning as a discursive public sphere, enables grassroots participation in China. The study of Zhang and Pentina (2012) shows that, in addition to its informative and social purpose, Weibo is used for a variety of other purposes, such as facilitating users’ professional development, entertaining, promoting certain self-images, personal expression, connecting with others who share interests or values, and helping others with advice and information.

Apart from facilitating interactions between officials and citizens, its anonymous nature can also provide its users with a potentially safe outlet for sharing their ideas, opinions, and inner thoughts, and for building a certain self-image. By using the service in this way, users can establish new social networks based on group-identification while experiencing the feeling of
being socially connected and part of a meaningful social community (Deaux, 1996; Negro, 2017a).

**WeChat**

WeChat is a mobile text and voice messaging service launched by Chinese social media giant Tencent in 2011. Users can send a one-minute (maximum) voice message, texts, pictures and short video clips to their contacts, organise group chats among a maximum of 500 people, and share voice or video calls with them (Figure 4.3). WeChat also offers a space called “Moments” or “Peng You Quan” (literally means ‘friends’ circle’) as shown in figure 4.4 which resembles the timeline on Facebook. Users can share words, photos, short video clips and links to online content with their contacts in this space, and interact with them in the comment area below this content. Although WeChat enables functions for its users to connect with people unknown to them in physical life, such as group chat and search people nearby, neither of these functions is named by participants as the main reason for their usage of WeChat; therefore, this study did not consider participants’ activities enabled by these functions.

Unlike on Weibo, social circles on WeChat are more private and exclusive (DeLuca et al., 2016). One needs to request permission in order to become a contact of other users. Due to this higher threshold for entry into contact with one’s friends, WeChat users mainly communicate and maintain connection with people they already know in their physical life. One’s feed on ‘Moments’ is only visible to one’s contacts, while interactions with contacts in the comment

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17 Tencent is a major provider of Internet value-added services in China. It is considered one of the ‘three kings’ of the Internet service providers in China, along with Alibaba (the largest e-commerce platform in China) and the search engine Baidu (Negro, 2017b).
area below the feed are only visible to shared friends. The frequency of users’ posts on both Weibo and WeChat varies from once in a few days to several posts within a day.

**Figure 4.3 A chat box on WeChat**

![Figure 4.3 A chat box on WeChat](image)

**Figure 4.4 Moments on WeChat**

![Figure 4.4 Moments on WeChat](image)
Because posts on ‘Moments’ are only visible to one’s contacts on WeChat, collecting this content involves ethical issues, so online data collected for this study was only from participants’ Weibo pages which can be accessed and searched by any internet users. I asked questions about what they share on ‘Moment’ on WeChat to make up for the absence of online data on WeChat.

I collected 20 pages (20 entries on each page) of Weibo posts in reverse chronological order from the day I received the address of the Weibo homepage of each participant. Users rarely use their normal names on Weibo and WeChat, but users can normally identify who their WeChat contacts are in physical life - but are unlikely to be able to do so with their followers on Weibo.

**Internet-mediated interview**

To acquire contextual information to facilitate my interpretation of the data collected from observation of participants’ online activities, internet-mediated audio interviews were conducted. I chose this approach for several reasons. First, it is a feasible way to collect the interview data for this research considering my participants are geographically dispersed. The scope for connecting participants located in different geographical locations is an obvious advantage of internet-mediated research (Hewson, 2007). Second, audio interviews can minimise the loss of information from lack of physical proximity and absence of extra-linguistic cues suffered by online text interview which can lead to ambiguities and misunderstandings (Hewson, 2014).
Third, synchronous audio interview entails real-time interaction between interviewer and interviewee. This can enable researchers to get more honest and less socially desirable answers to their interview questions since no time is allowed for deliberation (Gaiser, 2008). Moreover, the flow of a conversation enables researchers to ask follow-up questions by picking up on any interesting comment; such follow-up questions are a crucial tool for digging out the meanings participants attach to their online activities.

Fourth, audio interviews mediated by the internet can maintain the sense of anonymity or privacy that participants experience when they express themselves online. As they have been introduced by friends, I am not in their social circle and have never met them in person. In this sense, I could be in the social category of “the stranger” for them (Simmel, 1950). This social category identified by George Simmel is composed of people who are not embedded in a person’s social circle. This feature makes strangers ideal confidantes because people can be quite open with a stranger without worrying about her passing on information to the people in their social circle. My role as a stranger to the participants can make me an intimate information receiver with whom participants’ thoughts and opinions can be more comfortably shared. This relationship, with a stranger, can also produce a feeling of trust that enables a more in-depth disclosure of events and experiences by the participants. On top of this, internet-mediated audio interview can relieve the embarrassment felt by participants when they sit face-to-face with the interviewer. It also helps to reduce the intrusiveness of the researcher into the interviewee’s personal space (Hanna, 2012). These factors help to enhance candour and disclosure of participants in interviews (Hewson, 2014).

Another consideration for choosing audio interviews is that they require much less bandwidth and consume smaller amounts of data than video interviews. These features make it a reliable and cheap way of doing internet-mediated interviews. Although an audio interview is incapable
of catching non-verbal information, such as body movements and facial expressions which may be helpful in understanding the meaning and assessing the authenticity of verbal content recorded, something similar can be gained through carefully listening to the intonation in verbal expressions. Moreover, the benefit of synchronous online audio interviews in generating rich interview data far outweigh the value of non-verbal information in developing better understanding of interview data.

The interviews took place between April and July 2015. All the audio interviews were conducted via WeChat because it is available and familiar enough to both researcher and participants. The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder with the consent of participants. Since WeChat was chosen by participants as the tool to conduct interviews, I could become a contact on their WeChat, making their posts on ‘Moments’ on WeChat visible to me. Consistent with ethical principles, this content was neither collected as data nor quoted in any form in my report of the results. It was only used to triangulate the interview data regarding what participants said about their activities on WeChat. Throughout the research process, the researcher takes the position of an outside observer and interpreter of participants’ online activities. I follow participants on Weibo but do not interact with them. To them, I am just another follower from cyberspace whom they do not know in their physical life. The interview data was used for triangulation with online data, and in generating a fuller picture and better understanding of the online citizenship practices of Chinese young people.

Two pilot interviews were conducted with two of my friends on Weibo to test interview questions. By listening to the recordings of these two interviews, I adjusted the sequence of interview questions, deleted questions which were repetitive and proved unhelpful in engendering deep reflection, and changed the narration of some questions. In doing this I wanted to improve the flow of the interview and make it more effective in yielding rich and
detailed qualitative data. I also acquired a better sense of how to maintain the balance of narrative between me and the interviewees, which point or thread in a participant’s reply I should pick up on, and when to follow up and probe. In other words, pilot interviews helped to prepare my instrument and myself for the interview.

The audio interview via WeChat had two parts. The first half collected basic contextual information such as demographic information, participants’ work and current life situations, and their internet habits. The second part of the interview sought to gain participants’ perspectives on their motivations behind, and meanings they ascribed to the posts they made on Weibo. I used my observation of their Weibo account as the entry point for acquiring these insights. Before every interview, I extensively reviewed the posts collected from their Weibo page. Within an inclusive notion of citizenship which examines people’s daily engagement with social communities, I categorized these posts according to the communities with which they engaged. I chose posts from each category which typified participants’ engagement in these communities, and asked interviewees for background information about these posts, including the reasons behind them.

This kind of preparation ensures every interview question has a clear purpose. It also throws up specific material for both the interviewer and interviewee to discuss and reflect upon. This way of designing interview questions turned out to be effective in generating rich, elaborate and reflective qualitative data. Another benefit of designing interview questions in this way is that my research of their Weibo page as preparation for the interview showed my respect for participants. This respect, once felt by the participants, will significantly facilitate the establishment of a good rapport between us, enhancing self-disclosure and generating high quality interview data.
Of the 31 interviews, 30 were conducted via voice call on WeChat. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes. One interview was conducted via email because the participant was studying in Canada. The time difference between Vancouver, Canada and Melbourne, Australia made it difficult for us to work out a time for interview. After several back-and-forths, I accepted his suggestion to do the interview via email. Although as an asynchronous and text-based form of interview it is incapable of capturing extra-linguistic cues and does not allow the researcher to ask follow up questions, interview via email gives interviewees more time to deliberate on their answers, an outcome that is arguably beneficial for the generation of deep and reflective responses (Hewson, 2014).

**Data management and analysis**

All the audio interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder, with the consent of the participants, for the purpose of transcription and analysis. The responses in the interview via email were downloaded from my Gmail account. The interview data were stored in the password-protected computer at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education. The posts I collected from participants’ Weibo pages were formatted in word documents and also stored in the same password-protected computer.

Recording interviews not only brings convenience to transcription of interview data, it can also free up the researcher’s attention, unconstrained by taking notes of the answers given by the interviewees, allowing a focus on listening to responses and developing good follow-up questions which could lead to greater detail emerging and deeper reflections about online activities. On top of these benefits, interview recordings enable the researcher to review the interviews and make necessary adjustments to interview questions.
The online observation of participants’ Weibo archives showed that they engaged in hugely diverse activities involving social sharing and self-disclosure. It is beyond the capacity of a doctoral thesis to accommodate all of these activities; therefore, instead of presenting a range of disconnected individual views on different online doings, I have focused on the common themes and meanings reflected in participants’ experience of citizenship on the Chinese internet and their mutual constitutive relationship with the general process of social transformation in China. Following the inductive logic on which qualitative research relies, I grouped scattered empirical data into patterns using theoretical ideas, and presented my reflections on the data and theoretical ideas flowing from it with the intention of contributing to the construction of “truths” about the online citizenship practice of Chinese young people (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim in Chinese. All the information that can possibly be used to identify my participants was removed or substituted with pseudonyms. This included participants’ names on Weibo and WeChat, as well as the names they use in their physical life. Their personal photos in the downloaded online archives were also removed.

I used thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) to analyse the data. The initial coding of data was based on the transcribed interviews. Data collected from observing participants’ Weibo pages are used to triangulate the interview data and to complement my understanding of participants’ accounts for these archives. In the first level of analysis, I assign words or short phrases as codes to summarize the meaning of small portions of interview data. Typical codes include “learning critical thinking”, “familiarise with community expectation”, “consideration of self-disclosure”, “effort to make change”, “endorsing value of gender equality”, and “feeling of powerlessness in making change”.
On the second level of analysis, I grouped all the codes according to two lines of categorization and collapsed related codes into broader codes. The first line of categorization is the ways participants practise their citizenship. Broader codes generated from this level of coding include “learning practices of Weibo community”, “comply with community norms and expectations”, “build up online image”, “connect to like-minded people”, “endorsing values”. The second line of categorizing first level codes encompasses the reasons participants gave for their online activities. These codes profile the motivations behind their online doings, such as information-sharing, communicating with friends, self-presentation/disclosure, and opinion or feeling expression. They also provide insight into the meanings they derive from these activities, such as learning new things, exploring different opinions and values, getting updates of friends, finding like-minded people, venting emotions, and endorsing and making social change.

In the third level of analysis, I compared the two lines of codes. By relating these categories to the working definition of citizenship, I merged them into three overarching themes, namely citizenship learning, identity formation, and practice for social change. In the next three chapters, I will elaborate on and interpret these practices by locating them in the context of participants’ everyday life in current Chinese society.

**Language issues**

Interpretation of meaning of subjective experiences is the core of qualitative research. In developing this interpretation, language plays a key role because it mediates the expression of meaning and influences how meaning is constructed (Van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, & Deeg, 2010). Language issues in cross-language, qualitative research, defined as research “where data are collected in more than one language and the research process, at whatever stage(s), involves acts of translation between languages” (Temple & Young, 2004, p. 161), is crucial for keeping
the consistency between the meanings experienced by the participants and those interpreted in the findings by the researcher. This consistency is essential to the validity of a qualitative research study (Polkinghorne, 2007).

Current discussions about language issues in cross-language qualitative studies mainly focus on cases in which researcher and participants speak different languages (Squires, 2009). Less methodological attention has been paid to studies in which participants and researcher share the same non-English native language, but the results need to be presented in English (Van Nes et al., 2010), which is the case for this study. Below I explain how I addressed language issues in this study. I hope this account of the ways avoided meaning loss can help to build the validity and trustworthiness of this study.

In this research, since the participants and the researcher both spoke Mandarin, no language difference was presented in data collection. In order to avoid possible meaning loss caused by translation, interview recordings were transcribed in Chinese. The first analysis of interview transcriptions and Weibo archives were also conducted in Chinese. This decision, to delay translation into English for as long as possible, is supported by many other qualitative researchers as a way to avoid potential loss of meaning, or misunderstanding of participants’ meaning (Smith, Chen, & Liu, 2008; Van Nes et al., 2010). In the second analysis, I categorized the basic codes generated in the first analysis and identified overarching themes and concepts with the aid of the theoretical framework and concepts of citizenship. Because the conceptual ideas and related theories I used as overarching themes or concepts to interpret data are from the literature written in English, the main concepts and themes generated from the second analysis were in English. These English concepts and themes which I use in the presentation of my findings are convenient for me in communicating, and discussing my findings with my supervisors and peers.
Using quotes from participants in the presentation of findings is considered helpful to build up the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Van Nes et al., 2010). In order to accurately convey the meaning of the data, I took the suggestion of Smith et al. (2008) to use quotes in Mandarin together with my English translation of these quotes to illustrate the meaning I inferred from the data. Similarly, when some Chinese words or expressions from the data needed to be discussed and there were literally no direct translations for them, I used Pinyin (Chinese phonetics) to represent these words and explain their meaning in English. The Chinese characters for these words are also provided in the brackets following their Pinyin. This way, Mandarin and English-speaking readers could judge for themselves the credibility of the researcher’s interpretation and research findings (Hu et al., 2008).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented my methodological rationale and the two research methods I employed to examine the online citizenship practice of Chinese young people. I followed a qualitative and interpretative research rationale as I found it a useful way to get access to the diverse and emerging forms of citizenship embedded in young people’s everyday online social engagement. It is also an appropriate approach for unearthing the meaning participants ascribe to these practices through which I can interpret the notion of citizenship that is experienced and shaped by these online practices.

I chose online observation and internet-mediated audio interview to generate data for this research. I believe online observation enables an understanding of participants’ digital footprints that are visible in their daily online activities in specific online social contexts. In addition, internet-mediated audio interview makes possible the gathering of background information and stories relevant to the online activities which have been identified in online
observation. This online-offline integrated approach enables the researcher to understand participants’ online citizenship practices in the context of their lived reality, constituted in their engagement with the virtual and physical spaces.

In this qualitative process of data collection, particularly mediated through digital platforms, it was important to reflect on my position as a researcher. Issues of trust and validity have been at the centre of this research process. I have chosen Weibo and WeChat as digital platforms as sources from which to collect practices and beliefs about citizenship because they are among the top three sites of social media usage in China. While I am not claiming that the findings of this study can be replicated in the entire young Chinese population, I believe an interpretivist research approach is useful in generating significant insights into the ideas and practices of a social group. Thus, in the following three chapters, I present my participants’ views and citizenship practices, and my own analysis of them.
Chapter 5 Online Citizenship Practice as Learning

Introduction
In this chapter, I examine participants’ online citizenship practice through the lens of citizenship learning. This learning process is analysed using the theory of communities of practice developed by Wenger (1998). As a social learning theory, it is based on the assumption that learning occurs in the process of people’s engagement in communities of practice in which a group of people pursues shared enterprises. This notion of learning is shared by a recent development in citizenship education which maintains that citizenship learning is a lifelong process of “participation in a range of different formal and informal practices and communities” (Biesta et al., 2009, p. 5), and in the meaning-making activities reflected in various forms of social participation (Hoskins et al., 2012).

This chapter details citizenship learning through participants’ engagement in an online community (Weibo in this case) in two intertwined ways. The first is their learning of the norms and expected behaviours of the Weibo community which shape their practices in the realm of online citizenship. The outcome of this learning is demonstrated by their understanding of the shared repertoire, values, attitudes and joint enterprises for mutual engagement in this community. The second is their internet-mediated learning about Chinese society and their position in this society. Weibo, in this case, offers a new way of engaging with and learning about Chinese society. Through reconciling their learning about Chinese society through the two channels of mediated and direct engagement, participants form landscapes of practice upon which their notion of Chinese citizenship is drawn. I conclude this chapter by outlining the main barriers to engagement in this form of citizenship learning identified in participants’ accounts of the constraints on their activities on Weibo.
Learning online citizenship

Engaging with online communities is a means through which young adults learn and shape the practices of these communities. These practices are composed of explicit embodiments such as “language, symbols, regulations, and contracts”, as well as tacit elements such as conventions, untold rules, recognisable institutions, underlying assumptions, and shared world views” (Wenger, 1998, p. 47). Their competence in understanding, following, and contributing to shaping these practices in their engagement with these communities determines their location in and relationship with that community, that is, their online citizenship (citizenship in these online communities).

In this chapter, online citizenship is examined in relation to the Weibo community. Weibo as a social media platform is a subset of the Chinese online community and a space for the formation of countless small communities, such as communities formed by connected Weibo users who share particular interests or values, or communities formed in discussion of a social event. Although these communities have their own practices, and are constantly changing and reorganising, they mirror the overall practices of the Weibo community; therefore, I will elucidate participants’ learning of their online citizenship by examining their learning of the overall practices of the Weibo community through the dimensions of the shared repertoire, attitudes and values that underpin the mutual engagement and joint enterprise of this community.

Shared repertoires of online language practice

As Jordan (1989) notes, learning how to communicate in the manner of a full participant is a way for newcomers to become legitimate participants in a community. In a community of practice, language is an important property which is generated by its participants’ pursuit of shared enterprises across time (Wenger, 1998). A good grasp of the language is therefore
essential for people’s engagement with this community. It gives legitimacy to people’s participation in the community, enables them to make sense of the practice within each community of practice, and to experience this engagement as meaningful.

As the internet represents an alternative media space to government-dominated traditional media such as television and newspapers, Chinese internet users create a unique language for online expression (Yang, 2009). Similar to the continually updating English internet lexicon, lol (laughing out loud) and yolo (you only live once) being two examples, Chinese online language has an evolving lexicon with tacit meanings that are shared among internet users. Typical words in this lexicon include shenma\(^{18}\) (神马), fuyun\(^{19}\) (浮云), wanhuaile\(^{20}\) (玩坏了), tongxie\(^{21}\) (童鞋), diaosi\(^{22}\) (屌丝), and caonima\(^{23}\) (草泥马). This language represents an

\(^{18}\) Internet slang for shenme (什么, what), which literally means mythical horse. It is adopted by internet users due to its similar pronunciation to the word shenme.

\(^{19}\) Literally meaning floating cloud, it is used to refer to things not worth worrying about or unreachable. Put together with shenma, it makes one of the most commonly used online phrases “shenma doushi fuyun” (神马都是浮云, everything is nothing or not worth mentioning). Internet users often use this phrase to express their attitude towards things they think are not really important. A typical sentence using this phrase could be “zhiyao neng kuaikuai lele de shenghuo, qita shemma doushi fuyun” (只要能快快乐乐的生活, 其他神马都是浮云. Everything else is nothing as long as we can live happily).

\(^{20}\) Internet slang meaning a joke went too far or was overplayed.

\(^{21}\) Literally means children’s shoes. Since it has a pronunciation similar to the Chinese word “tongxue” (同学, classmate or schoolmate), it is widely used by young internet users as an Internet slang word for classmate.

\(^{22}\) This example of internet slang first appeared in late 2011. It was originally used by internet users to mock the fans of a narcissistic Chinese football player named Li Yi. Later it evolved into a term of self-mockery extensively used among young Chinese internet users to describe one’s trivialness. It is widely adopted as an identity label by Chinese young people, especially those in urban areas who feel left behind by rapid economic growth and treacherous social stratification; they see themselves as the underprivileged and as losers. It is also regarded as a less obtrusive form of political resistance and struggle among disenfranchised and powerless Chinese young people (Yang et al., 2014).

\(^{23}\) Literally means Grass Mud Horse, which is a rare species of horse that looks similar to an alpaca according to the illustrative pictures used by internet users. It is a homophone of a swear word in Chinese which was adopted to protest against a wave of tightened internet control in China by the government in 2009. This wave of control which allegedly targeted ‘low and vulgar practices on the Internet’ (整治互联网低俗之风) shut down more than 1900 websites and 250 blogs. While some were overtly pornographic sites, many were platforms where social and
embodiment of the history of internet users’ pursuit of shared enterprise in the online community, and is part of the “shared repertoire” of the online community (Wenger, 1998); it is an essential component of the property of online communities of practice.

The usage of this language is common in participants’ online posts on Weibo. Apart from these embodied features, participants in this study also share similar perceptions about “good” language practice in the online community. Shenying is a 25 year old producer at a television station in Guangzhou. She has been doing the job for three years since graduating from the media and communication department of a local university. She lives with her family. Because of her busy work, she relies heavily on WeChat to keep up with what their friends are doing while also spending considerable time on the internet doing searches and discussing with colleagues the topics for the TV program she produces. She stated that good and effective online expression should provide a distinctive view in refined and incisive language (独一无二的观点，而且提炼的很精辟), or examine things from a different perspective (角度找的很好，我找不到).

“Be interesting” is another characteristic of good language practice on Weibo. Zhangguai is a 31 year old entrepreneur who runs a media studio with his business partners in Beijing. He finished his undergraduate study in Jilin24 and Master’s study in Beijing. During his Master’s study he met his partner with whom he is currently living in a rented apartment in Beijing. The internet is the primary channel through which he acquires resources and learning materials to keep up with new technologies for video production. He also uses various online websites and platforms to read the news, watch videos, and socialise with friends. He emphasises humour as

24 Jilin is a north-eastern province in China bordering North Korea and Russia. It is more than a thousand kilometres from Beijing.
an essential ingredient of “good” language practice in the online community. He said that, for him and his friends, expressing things in a humorous way has become “a subconscious habit” (一个下意识的习惯) in their online expression, even when the topics they talk about are serious, such as social inequality or government wrongdoing. He said that “You simply feel it is very tedious and boring if you say something as it is without a bit of teasing or bantering” (就觉得不调侃一下，用大白话的方式说出来，就总觉得特别没劲).

This language practice was also noted by another participant, Xiaoyu, who has been working as a Chinese teacher at a primary school in Ningbo\textsuperscript{25} for two years. Xiaoyu received her Master’s degree in education from a university in Henan province when she was 25. She lives alone in rented accommodation, only returning to her hometown in Shanxi Province\textsuperscript{26} twice a year during school holidays. She mainly uses Weibo for news, and WeChat to stay in touch with friends and relatives in her hometown. To her, the internet is an indispensable way to communicate and socialise with other people. In the interview, she stated that she likes online content that is written in a witty and humorous manner, but that is also direct and rational (言语文风趣幽默，说话理性简练). While she values this approach, she feels that her language competence does not allow her to offer such content (我自己也会想要调侃一点，会想往那方面尝试，但是表达能力不够).

Participants’ perceptions of language practice on Weibo that are discussed above reflect plain language, flexible usage of online colloquial/internet slang, and humorous and sarcastic narratives. These perceptions are consistent with other studies of Chinese internet culture which

\textsuperscript{25} Ningbo is a sub-provincial city in northeast Zhejiang province in China. It is also a major port and industrial hub lies south of Shanghai on Hangzhou Bay.

\textsuperscript{26} This province lies in central China, bordering the provinces of Gansu, Ningxia, and Inner Mongolia. Xi’an is the provincial capital. It had about 38 million people by the end of 2014 (quoted from China National Bureau of Statistics, URL: http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2015/indexch.htm). It is about 1500 kilometres away from Ningbo.
highlight the uniqueness of online expression created and reproduced by Chinese internet users in the cultural and socio-political context of China (Latham, 2012; Meng, 2011; Yang & Jiang, 2015; Yang et al., 2014). This informal, accessible and entertaining manner of online language casts the Chinese internet as an alternative space for information communication and public expression, different from mainstream mass media which are strictly regulated by the authorities and dominated by rigid and formalised rhetoric. By learning and taking on this alternative language practice, internet users both gain legitimacy in their online community and contribute to maintaining and developing this language practice. This process enables them to make meaning of the practice of this community and claim their citizenship of this community.

Linguistic practice is a form of dynamic learning that occurs when newcomers engage with a community. They learn how to talk according to the collective expectations of the community, which is essential for establishing the legitimacy of their participation; however, their grasp of community language does not necessarily mean that they have learnt “the actual practice the language is supposed to be about” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 108). Learning about communities of practice also involves making sense of the meaning of their participation through the reciprocal process of learning and shaping the mutual engagement and shared enterprises of these communities of practice.

**Community expectations for content generation**

Communities of practice are generated through mutual engagement between community members (Wenger, 1998). This mutual engagement yields tractable norms and practices on which the coherence of a community is predicated. In the Weibo community, all participants spend a considerable amount of time browsing and generating content. Through these activities, they learn the collective expectations of the Weibo community for the contributions of its members and use what they have learnt to regulate their content generation activities.
Participants’ perceptions of the collective expectations of the Weibo community for user-generated content can be summarised as *Youqu* (有趣, interesting) and *Youyingyang* (有营养, literally meaning nutritious, and here can be understood as beneficial or practically useful), to highlight the two words repeatedly used by participants. Content which can enrich their knowledge and understanding of their society or is of practical use for their daily life is deemed as *Youyingyang*. Examples of this kind of material given by participants include a short video teaching new traffic rules, news reports or comments based on sound evidence and rational analysis, and opinion pieces which offer fresh perspectives and can help them to get a comprehensive picture or an informed understanding of an issue.

For the participants in this study, online content also needs to be interesting so that it can engage people’s attention. Xiaoyu commented that “views and opinions which are expressed in a satirical or teasing manner are definitely more likely to be accepted online, the more serious your online expression gets, the less attention you will be likely to receive” (以那种调侃的口气说的观点，大家肯定会比较容易接受, 你越是一本正经的, 大家越会觉得不太关注).

This perception was also shared by another participant. Huaxia has recently graduated from a university in his hometown in Henan Province27, majoring in journalism. He actively generates content on Weibo, initiating a hashtag on Weibo to comment on the latest social and political news; he has been continually contributing to this hashtag for two years. He likes to play basketball and is a fan of the National Basketball Association (NBA) in the United States. He follows NBA-related Weibo accounts and frequently shares news about NBA games and his favourite NBA players. At the time the interview was conducted, he was informed that he

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had failed the entrance exam for postgraduate study and had started to look for jobs while waiting for his score in the state civil service examination which would decide if he could be recruited as a civil servant in government institutions. In response to my question about the expectations of the Weibo community for user-generated content, Huaxia said that he appreciates well-written puns, parodies, sarcasm, and political jokes, all of which have strong resonance among internet users.

The user-generated content which aligns with the two expectations of the Weibo community for the engagement of its users not only entertains but also provides a source of identification with a particular community. These communities arise when people who can see the point of particular content (such as to understand sarcasm) connect with each other and build shared knowledge (Biscontini, 2016). Participants’ understanding of the expectations, rights and responsibilities of the Weibo community about their content generation is the outcome of their learning about the practices and enterprise of the Weibo community. This learning occurs as they engage with this community as content consumer and generator, enabling them to identify with the Weibo community. Their contribution, which enriches the Weibo community, also enriches themselves. The establishment of this mutually enriching relationship between them and the Weibo community supports the belief that they can and should be part of this enriching process (Pring, 2016), and lays the foundation of their citizenship in the Weibo community.

**Mutual engagement—attitudes and values**

A community of practice is maintained by the mutual engagement of its members, underpinned by a set of shared beliefs and values. The following examples from participants in my research illustrate how productive mutual engagement in communities of practice is “as much a matter of diversity as it is a matter of homogeneity” (Wenger, 1998, p. 75).
All the participants share the idea that even though the public discussion on Weibo will not necessarily lead to ideal solutions to social issues, it can at least make the different perspectives of a social issue visible, and this is crucial for their informed understanding of Chinese society. Shijie, Cimi, Shihou and Xiaomeng in different ways show how a belief in tolerance is essential to the Weibo community.

This is illustrated by Shijie, a 19-year-old junior student at a university in Canada. He lives alone in rented accommodation in Vancouver, visiting his parents who live in Shandong Province 28 twice a year. The internet has become inseparable from his study, life, and entertainment. He uses a wide variety of internet services and social media apps, such as Facebook, Instagram, Google, and YouTube, which are currently blocked in China, but he keeps using WeChat as his primary tool for making contact with his friends, family, and former classmates in China, while using Weibo to access the latest news in China. In his self-introduction on his Weibo page, he wrote: “I said I want freedom, but the price is away from home all on my own” (我说我要自由，可代价是孤身一人，背井离乡). In the interview, he said he normally does not criticise other people’s views, explaining that:

This is such a vast and diversified world. People have different opinions just because their ways of thinking and the perspectives they take are different. It does not necessarily mean their view is wrong

万千世界，每个人的想法和考虑角度不同并不代表别人就是错的。

28 An eastern Chinese province on the Yellow Sea.
Another example is provided by Cimi, a sophomore majoring in landscape architecture at a university in Jinan\(^29\). She lives in a dormitory on campus during weekdays and visits her parents who live in the same city over weekends. She frequently shares her feelings, random thoughts, and things that happen in her university life. Typical content on her Weibo page includes complaints about the overwhelming pressure of studying, celebrations for the completion of group projects, or brief comments regarding new TV series, movies and songs. She also participates in online discussion of social events from time to time through placing her own posts or re-posting other people’s comments, with which she agrees on Weibo. When was asked if she would refute opinions with which she disagreed, she stated that “everybody is unique, so everybody can express their own opinion, you do not have to post your opinion under their post to refute” (我觉得大家每个人都是不一样的，所以就是，大家都可以表达自己的观点，不一定非要去人家底下发表自己不同的观点吧).

This tolerance for different opinions on Weibo is also shared by Shihou, a 23 year old senior student studying urban planning at a university in Guangzhou. He has just started to look for internships for the last year of his study (his undergraduate study spans five years). He uses the internet mainly for browsing Weibo, listening to music and watching movies. Weibo is his primary source of information which ranges from social and political news to gossip about celebrities in the entertainment industry. He uses WeChat to get updates on his friends, and to read articles from subscribed public/official accounts\(^30\). He prefers Weibo to WeChat because he can see the information and views shared by people from all walks of life, views that broaden

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\(^{29}\) The provincial capital of eastern China's Shandong province.

\(^{30}\) A free cooperation and promotion service launched for individuals, government institutions, media and enterprises. Official/public accounts can publish media content on their WeChat homepage to promote their services, content, and brands to billions of WeChat users, thus reducing dissemination costs, raising brand popularity, and building up more influential brand images. A large number of public/official accounts are based on user subscription. It provides a new means of propagating information which is conducive to a closer and trusting relationship between the content providers and their readers. This kind of account is intended for individuals, media, enterprises, government, or other organisations (Tencent, 2017).
his horizon. He explained the importance of tolerance when engaging with the Weibo community by stating:

Different opinions are valuable, even for those that are hard for me to take. Because when a social event happens, we need different voices to help us to form an unbiased judgment. So, I will not follow or avoid certain people intentionally, I still mainly want to extend my horizon on Weibo, try my best to hear from different voices, and then to form my own judgement.

不同观点很重要，即使有些让我觉得，就是，接受不了。因为在不同的事件发生的时候，需要有这样不同的声音来，来帮助你更好地去判断你自己的一个，呃，形成自己的一个判断吧，就可以避免它偏颇。所以我不会说特别去关注、或者是特别不去关注某些人，还是希望就自己开拓眼界为主吧，就尽可能去听到不同声音，然后再去形成自己的判断吧。

This attitude of tolerance was also endorsed by Xiaomeng, a 28 year old product manager from Jiangxi Province. Xiaomeng works at a state-owned company in Shenzhen, responsible for promoting and selling payment devices such as POS (point of sale) machines. He graduated with a bachelor’s degree at a university in Xi’an (the capital of Shanxi Province in central China), after which he worked in Shenzhen. He lives with his partner in Shenzhen and frequently travels domestically for business purposes. He mainly uses the internet to contact customers via QQ and email, keep updated on the latest trends in online and offline payment

technology, follow social and political news through Weibo, and to watch videos or play games when he has free time. He spends ten hours a day online.

In the interview, he shared his experience of being attacked on Weibo by extreme nationalists for expressing his disagreement with their hostility toward Japan, saying, “I have no doubt about the evil things Japan did to China in the past, but now we are in peace, Japan has developed really fast after the war, the country has a lot that we can learn from” (我不怀疑日本人所做过的种种的恶行, 但是现在是和平年代, 日本战后发展的速度确实很快, 有很多值得我们中国人学习的地方). When asked how he felt about these attacks, he showed his tolerance by saying that these people are probably very young, or may have limited information, knowledge and life experiences, which to him is normal, because “after all, we all have been young before” (毕竟，我们都有过年轻的那个时候).

As well as tolerance, participants also try to manifest rational and reasonable attitudes within the Weibo community. This intent is shown in participants’ descriptions of a valid discussion on Weibo. Shihou, for example, talked about his experience of an unpleasant discussion on Weibo with a well-known anchor on a local TV program. In that discussion, while he was still trying to convince the anchor, citing specific evidence, that it is problematic to say that today’s young people are childish, the anchor was still making over-generalised statements about the childishness of young people; he was not listening to Shihou who thought the discussion was meaningless, contrasting with a valid and effective discussion which he described:

...It shouldn’t involve too much of participants’ personal factors, shouldn’t be about one defeating another with their argument. It should be about achieving mutual understanding and agreement. It should be based on facts and reasons, on rational analysis of pros and
cons; only in this way, can a discussion produce something valuable, or reach an agreement. Only the discussions like this are valuable.

……讨论不应该涉及太多个人因素，也不是一方为了战胜另一方。讨论应该是为了互相理解或达成某种共识。应该要讲理据，然后讲利弊分析，只有这样，才能讨论，才能得出一些有价值的东西，或者是达到一个共识的东西吧。这样才是比较有价值的讨论。

Zeqin’s attitude is similar. He is a 26 year old public relations manager at an advertising company in Shenzhen, a metropolitan city 440 kilometres away from his hometown Chaozhou (a city in the eastern Guangdong Province\(^\text{32}\)). He holds a college degree in metallurgy. Most of the time he lives alone, but his brother sometimes comes to Shenzhen and lives with him. Apart from work, he only uses the internet on iPad or smartphone because “it is too much trouble to turn on a computer” (开电脑是一件非常累的事情). After work, he mainly uses the internet to watch videos and to browse Weibo and WeChat. He values posts and discussions that are based on facts and evidence. In response to my question about his participation in online discussions, he commented:

Sometimes discussion is necessary for finding the truth, but I wish we could base our discussions on evidence, facts, and proper reasoning, do not bring strong personal biases into it, or express personal opinions solely based on some personal political ideology, this is not right.

\(^{32}\) A coastal province of southeast China, bordering Hong Kong and Macau. It had 107.24 million people by the end of 2014 (data quoted from China National Bureau of Statistics, URL: http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2015/indexch.htm). It is famous for its industrial Pearl River Delta region. Guangzhou is the provincial capital.
有些事情是必须要坐下来讨论，才能够出真理，但是我还是希望说大家讨论的时候，能够有理有据，能够根据事实来说话，而不要带有强烈的个人的一个偏见，以及某种个人的政治意识之类的东西，去表达自己的观点，这是不对的。

Apart from developing rational and tolerant attitudes, participants also learn about the values underpinning the practices of the Weibo community to which they have contributed. These values were described by participants in this study as reflecting equal right of expression in online communities and responsible contributions to these communities. Xiaomeng said in the interview:

Everybody has his/her right and freedom to express their opinion, …, I’ll never attack others even if their opinion is entirely against mine because people come from different ages, family backgrounds, and have different learning and working experiences, it is just the points of their main concern are different.

每个人都有的权利和自由去表达他们的观点……，我绝对不会去攻击别人，即使他说的观点跟我的根本就是两派，因为可能年龄，家庭，学习，工作经验的一些区别吧，每个人关注的点不一样。

While the value placed on equality in online expression suggests the rights that participants feel entitled to claim as online citizens, participants also share a view that this right should be used responsibly, shown in their efforts to be responsible content generators and distributors. Zeqin said he only Likes or re-posts information and opinions which are “faithful, well-
grounded, and make a clear point” (实事求是，有理有据，观点鲜明). His premise for online expression is “do not abuse others” (不去攻击别人).

The value of making responsible use of the right to online expression was also stressed by Yanyu, a 27 year old TV journalist at a county-level broadcasting and TV station in Guangdong Province. Yanyu has a bachelor’s degree in journalism and has been doing the job for more than three years. Being a journalist at a county-level TV station, she constantly feels the pain of being “unable to report what you want to report, but having to report what you do not want to report” (在国内当镇街记者，你想说的不能说，你不想说的逼着你说). She thinks that anonymous online participation is a way for her to express what she really wants to say. In the interview, she said that a Weibo user “should be able to identify right (information) from wrong, and to choose to distribute that right or true information” (他应该自己懂得去辨认怎么样是对，怎么样是错，然后去选择性的传播一些，正确的，或者真实的信息).

Xuexin and Zeqin also identify with the value of being responsible members of the Weibo community. Xuexin is the general secretary at a department store in Guangzhou. She is 26 years old and has been working at this department store for almost three years after graduating from a university in the same city. She currently lives with her family. In the interview, she said a good Weibo user should not disseminate rumours and should be responsible for her activities online. Zeqin indicated that he tries to post content which is different from others and to minimise repetition of information on Weibo. A few of the participants also stated that they only express their opinion when their view is absent on Weibo. It is evident that the attitudes and values for mutual engagement on Weibo as learned by the participants are strictly applied in their engagement with the Weibo community. In this sense, their mutual engagement on Weibo is a reciprocal process of learning and shaping the practices of the Weibo community.
Joint enterprise in an online community

In addition to the shared repertoire and mutual engagement, the sense of embarking on a joint enterprise is a definitive element of a community of practice. This sense is negotiated in the process of mutual engagement between the members of this community. Taken together, participants’ perceptions of their online community’s expectations for their content contribution, and their attitudes, values, and repertoires for effective participation, point to the joint construction of an equal, engaging, accountable and tolerant space for information-sharing and opinion expression: a joint enterprise. This enterprise, when placed in the general Chinese social context, can be described as the construction of an equal and tolerant space, rich in reliable information and diversified opinions, which can support one’s learning about Chinese society, and can nourish informed, active, and fruitful public discussion.

This joint enterprise is illustrated by participants’ statements about the significance of Weibo as a source of reliable information and diversified opinion. Lingzi is 27, a news reporter located in Foshan. She works for a metropolitan daily headquartered in Guangzhou, responsible for reporting the cultural and political news. Living with her family in Foshan, she said jokingly in the interview that the most prominent personal issue for her at the moment is getting married (赶紧嫁掉). In commenting on the significance of the Weibo community for her, she stated that “Weibo could expand the information you can see” (微博会开拓一些你看不到的东西).

This view is widely shared by other participants. Shihou shared in the interview that:

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33 Foshan is a prefecture-level city in central Guangdong Province in southeastern China. It has been a prosperous trade centre in history. It is now an industrial city with a high rate of economic development.
On Weibo, because you can follow people of a different kind, from all walks of life, ..., the more you follow, the more you see. ..., in this process, you can broaden your horizons, and things related to your values will gradually mature. I feel Weibo is beneficial for this process because if you know how to screen and reflect on the content generated by others, it is actually a process in which you can acquire different life experiences.

我觉得因为在微博上面你可以关注各种各样、各行各业的人，……你关注的越多，你看到的越多。……这个过程当中，你的视野会越来越开阔，然后你的价值观念方面的东西会慢慢变得更成熟一点。我觉得就微博对这个过程是有益处的，因为看别人的东西，你会加以筛选和思考的话，那这些东西其实是一个快速地去体验不同的经历这样的一个过程吧。

Similarly, Shijie said that “Weibo can help me understand the ins and outs of a social phenomenon or event, know more opinions, possibilities, and get a deeper understanding” (微博能帮我更多的扩展事情的来龙去脉, 多一个观点, 多一种可能, 多一些理解). Cimi also commented that the feedback from other internet users on her posts helps her to develop her opinions about certain social issues. Zhangguai said the reason he shares his views online is that he wants to make his followers aware of the existence of an opinion or a voice about a particular issue, to find out how they think about this issue, and to discuss it with them.

As mass media are still largely regulated by the government despite the marketisation of the media sector in China (Zhao, 2008), the joint enterprise of constructing Weibo as a source of high quality information and diversified opinions is essential for Weibo to continue operating as an alternative space for news and public discussion. This joint enterprise can shape Weibo into a supportive community, enabling its members to learn the rules, practices, behaviours and identities in relation to Chinese society. It produces relations of accountability and mutuality,
enriching relationships between individuals and their online community (Pring, 2016). This enterprise internalises participants’ learning of “the normative behaviours, cues, and rituals” that generate the active informal mode of interaction on Weibo (Wang, 2013, p. 373), that is, the practices in the Weibo community by which their online citizenship is defined (Gastil, 2004). It structures participants’ dynamic practice of their online citizenship in the same way that rhythm structures music (Wenger, 1998).

As I have foregrounded the shared understanding of online citizenship which is defined by the practices learned by participants within the Weibo community, it is important to note that this does not necessarily suggest a shared enterprise among all the Weibo users. The achievement of this enterprise relies on their everyday sharing and the interaction of their ideas and values, that is, their practice of online citizenship. Due to the diversity of Weibo users, the joint enterprise shared by the participants of this study which was discussed above is only one version of online citizenship. It faces tremendous challenges from the involvement of Weibo users who are engaged for other purposes, such as marketing and business promotion.

As shown in my analysis of their learning about online identity, the joint enterprise of their practice of online citizenship points to the construction of a reliable and diversified source of information and opinion which can support Weibo users’ learning about Chinese society. This leads to another dimension of their understanding of citizenship, embedded in the same set of online activities, that is, the learning of their citizenship in relation to Chinese society via Weibo-mediated social engagement. I analyse this dimension of their citizenship learning in the next section.
Learning citizenship though Weibo-mediated social engagement

Participants of this study engage with various interrelated virtual and physical communities of practice in their everyday lives. These communities could be the Weibo community, the project team in their workplace, or the sports group after work. These communities constitute “a complex social landscape of shared practices, boundaries, peripheries, overlaps, connections, and encounters” (Wenger, 1998, p. 118). Through navigating their way in this landscape of practices, they form their view of citizenship and they build boundaries of what different citizenships should be about; this enables them to participate in different communities of practice and to experience their participation in these communities as meaningful.

The Weibo community is the space in which participants practise their online citizenship through interactive activities such as information sharing and opinion expression. More importantly, it also works as a mediated space in which participants engage with other communities of practice which they would otherwise not be able to access. This feature of the internet extended the realms of people’s social learning and strengthened their social learning capabilities. It becomes an artefact beneficial for people in forming and engaging with different social communities, understanding practices in these communities, and managing their boundaries (Wenger, 1998).

Mediated social learning: the internet as boundary object

As stated above, the mutual engagement of Weibo users makes Weibo a space of varied opinions and information. These opinions and information are the result of people’s reification of the meanings they make through their participation in and across different communities of practice. In this sense, Weibo can be regarded as a boundary object, defined by Wenger (1998) as “objects that serve to coordinate the perspectives of various constituencies for some purpose”
It provides rich and vibrant scenarios for its participants’ learning about the practices in the communities with which they engage in their everyday lives.

In the field of media studies, it is argued that social media has fostered new ways of experiencing the world; it constructs our experience of place, culture and belonging through syncretising with other experiences. Martin and Rizvi (2014), for example, investigated how international university students from China and India experience Melbourne through local and transnational media, and how this experience generates their perceptions of Melbourne as a place. Their study shows that the international students’ experience of Melbourne as a place they inhabit is profoundly shaped by their fragmented, de-territorialised and syncretic senses of both home and Australia. This mediated co-presence of home and Australia which fundamentally shapes their experience of Melbourne is enabled by the simultaneity offered by digital media. This study demonstrates how digital media can play a fundamental role in one’s meaning-making process in relation to a place or a society in which one resides.

This function also represents important opportunities for learning (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015). In their research, Wenger-Trayner et al. (2015) organised people from different practice contexts to work together. It examined the learning that occurs at the boundaries between the various communities of practice represented by these people. Their study illustrates that encounters between various practices and understandings are commonplace in these mixed working settings, and that exploring the landscape of different practices offers learning opportunities of great potential. In the case of this study, Weibo provides a mediated space in which participants can experience the practices in and across the communities of practice with which they engage in their everyday lives. Their mutual engagement in the Weibo community holds great potential for them in making meaning of the Chinese society that they experience on a daily basis.
The function of the internet as a boundary object for learning and shaping the practices of Chinese society is acknowledged by this study’s participants. One of the most frequently mentioned values of the internet for my participants is that it enables them to hear other people’s opinions on the issues about which they care, thus gaining access to new perspectives. Given the protective Chinese school system which has little space for social engagement, and the government-controlled mass media which tends to offer homogeneous perspectives and opinions, this function is crucial for young Chinese in developing an informed understanding of social affairs and issues that they come across in their everyday lives. Below are some typical statements in relation to the value of this function of the internet.

Wing is 24, an accountant at a department store in Guangzhou. She graduated from a university in Guangzhou and currently lives with her family in the same city. She is a quiet person, often surfing the internet during her day at work. She rarely remains online after work. She follows local news, sports news and gossip about celebrities on the internet. Her comments and re-posts of social news are limited to those about which she feels strongly, and hence are infrequent. When Wing was talking about the significance of Weibo in her life, she said that:

When I have access to more information and opinion, my views could become more comprehensive, I may consider different perspectives when I need to make a decision, and I can learn how to analyse an issue from different directions/perspectives.

当我能够接触到更多信息和观点的时候，我的观点就能更全面，我可能会在做决定的时候考虑不同的角度，我也可以学习怎样从不同角度来思考一个问题。
Similarly, Shenying stated:

It (Weibo) can let you hear multiple opinions; you can use it as a tool for your own research of an issue, you can also get help from other experts. At least it can help me to get a relatively comprehensive understanding of an event or a phenomenon, to form my own judgment/opinion, it also helps me realise what position I am at, what attitude and action I should choose to take.

它（微博）的作用是让你听得见多方意见，也可以自己寻根究底，还有各路高人支招解救。最起码帮助我获得对事件或现象一个较全面的认识，有助于我形成自己的判断，也可以知道自己在哪个位置，选择什么态度和行动。

Some participants also admit that their participation in online communities of practice plays a vital role in developing their understanding of the general social context and ways to engage with it, fostering their ability to analyse and think about social issues, improving their abilities in online expression, and forming and refining their values. These competencies and values are all essential for effective social participation. Zeqin commented, for example, that:

This understanding is fundamental because as you live, you should not be ignorant. You should live a sober life, …, know why you live, know how good is your life, and know what the world is like, this is essential.

这是很重要的，因为我觉得你活着，你不能活得蠢吧。你要活得清醒一点，……，知道自己为什么活，知道自己活得怎么样，知道这个世界怎样，这是很关键的。
Shihou commented on the significance of Weibo for him:

Weibo is my main channel to know what is going on outside (of the university), like what is happening outside and some hot social issues. This information is important because I can form my attitudes, ideas and values towards this society by integrating the online information about social events with my own knowledge. It is helpful not exactly in a sense that it can help me adjust to the society, but it can help me understand the environment that I live in. It is an intellectual process and part of my life. I feel it is crucial for a person, because if we do not try to make sense of things in our life, what else can we do?”

Weibo as a boundary object accommodates the reifications of the participation of its users in various social communities, enabling people to learn about Chinese society through other people’s experiences of social participation represented on Weibo. At the same time, participants also contribute to this body of experience by sharing information or expressing their opinions on Weibo. In this sense, this form of mediated citizenship learning represents a new kind of citizenship practice characterised by a giving and taking process.
The results of internet-mediated social learning, however, may not be consistent with those produced by people’s direct engagement in the communities of practice of physical life. This discrepancy poses a challenge to people’s coherent understanding of Chinese society which entails coordinating the meanings they make through their engagement in different communities of practice. In the next section, I draw upon the experience of a participant to show how learning about a social event can be reconciled through its representation on Weibo and observation of that event in physical space.

**Landscape of practice: reconciliation of learning in communities of practice**

Even though the internet has already become a natural avenue through which people learn about their society, some are conscious of the mediated nature of the world they experience on Weibo. Zixun, for example, is a 28 year old first year PhD candidate at a university in Guangzhou. He finished his undergraduate study in Jiangxi Province (in the southeast of China) and studied for his master degree in Guangzhou. He lives in a dormitory on campus, visiting his family in Northeast China during school holidays. An active user of Weibo, he has extensive connections on Weibo with other student organisations at the same university. He successfully used Weibo as an online platform to assist his candidature for the president of the postgraduate student union in 2014.

When Zixun was asked if online participation could satisfy all his needs for social and political participation, he told me:

Definitely cannot, because lots of information is still unavailable online, and lots of information online is interpreted out of its context. It can lead or change your thoughts
before you realise it. So the most important thing is to participate in reality. The internet is just a supplement. It can help you to get prepared for your engagement in real society.

肯定不能啊，因为很多信息是闭塞的，而且网络上的很多信息是断章取义的。它在不知不觉间就会引导你的想法，把你的想法改变了。所以说，最重要的还是应该是到现实当中去参与，网络只是辅助的一个作用，在你到现实当中去探索之前帮助你做一些准备。

The reconciling of citizenship learning through engagement with online and offline communities is well illustrated by the experience of one participant. Xiaoyu talked about how she realised the mediated nature of the world represented online through seeing a discrepancy between online representation and her witness experience of the Ningbo paraxylene (PX) event in 2012. In this event, citizens in Ningbo expressed their opposition towards the proposed construction of a PX factory, believed to be potentially harmful to the local environment, by a jiti sanbu (集体散步, collective stroll) to the local government building. Since the collective action was mobilised using the internet and mobile phones, it was widely studied as a typical case of digital activism in China (Dong, 2013; Liu, 2015).

Xiaoyu said that she experienced the event on both Weibo and in physical space. It was her observation that the information about this event on Weibo was much more exaggerated in terms of the number of participants and the mood of the protesting masses. She said that only about 1,000 people joined the walk at the beginning, the crowd becoming bigger as many curious spectators joined the walk along the way. The presence of local and foreign media also

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34 A word used by participants in this event to replace the word demonstration in their online posts and mobile phone messages in order to bypass censorship, and to highlight the peaceful nature of this collective action to appease the repression of local government.
encouraged more spectators to join. The crowd at the end was five to six times bigger than its original size, but most of them were just curious spectators who did not necessarily care about the construction of the PX factory.

She saw records of this event on Weibo that reported people being beaten during the protest, students at Ningbo University being prohibited from going into the downtown area, and public transport being suspended - all of which, according to her on-site observation, were just rumours. When asked about the effect of her recognition of this difference between the online representation and her personal observation of the same event, she said that it made her a more responsible internet user; she will consume online content more critically in future, only posting or sharing content online after careful verification.

People experience encounters between different practices and understandings in the landscape of practice. Xiaoyu’s experience shows how her reconciliation of learning on Weibo and in physical space could foster her awareness of the limitations of mediated social engagement, and improve her literacy as an informed and responsible online citizen (Wineburg, Reisman, & Gillis, 2015). It also shows the interactive relationship between the learning that occurs in different communities of practice. By reconciling these learning experiences in one’s unique landscape of practice, one can form a coherent understanding of Chinese society informed by their experience of multiple memberships in and across various virtual and physical communities. In other words, their Chinese citizenship is defined by the reconciled practices of the communities with which they engage in their everyday lives; their citizenship is learned through their participation in and across these communities.
Barriers to online citizenship learning

When learning is understood as social practice, the legitimacy of a learner’s participation in a community of practice becomes the premise for the occurrence of learning. This legitimacy, as Lave & Wenger (1991) note, is defined by “the social structure of this practice, its power relations, and its conditions for legitimacy” (p. 98). These factors determine whether a participant has access to “a wide range of ongoing activities, old-timers, and other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation” (ibid., p. 101). These resources were rephrased as three dimensions of communities of practice which included “access to mutual engagement with other members, to their actions and their negotiation of the enterprise, and to the repertoire in use” (Wenger, 1998, p. 100). They are essential conditions for one’s changing participation and identity transformation in a community of practice. In relation to the legitimacy of the participation of Chinese internet users in online communities, apart from some basic factors such as internet access and literacy levels that can constrain their participation, there are some contextual factors that limit Chinese internet users’ access to the resources and activities afforded by the internet and that jeopardize their learning of the practices of the Chinese online community and of society in general.

Lave & Wenger (1991) analyse the barriers for newcomers to acquiring their status as legitimate peripheral participants through studying the reproduction cycles of the communities. According to communication scholar Zhao Yuezhi, the dynamics of Chinese internet politics reflect a balance constructed by a conflictual relationship between the party-state, the capitalising market, and the interests of China’s subaltern classes (Zhao, 2008). This is in line with the argument by Poell and van Dijck (2016), from an international perspective, which maintains that the public-ness of online communities as communities of practice and spaces for public discussion is constructed at the “intersection of online popular contestation, the controlling efforts of states, and the techno-commercial strategies of social media corporations”
Following this vein of analysis, I delineate below the possible barriers these three stakeholders bring to Chinese internet users’ legitimate participation in the online space.

**Learning barriers posed by the state**

From the state side, the Chinese authorities’ censorship of online information and expression, together with their efforts in guiding online public opinion by hiring pro-government internet commentators, constitute substantial threats to the legitimacy of Chinese internet users in online communities of practice. It was a common experience among this study’s participants that some of their Weibo posts were deleted after a certain period of time. Although these deleted posts are unlikely to have ramifications endangering their personal lives, and although participants do not think this censorship will change their online behaviour significantly, they did admit in the interviews that the existence of censorship reduces the richness and diversity of information and opinion available online, discouraging them from active online participation and expression. Zhangguai stated in the interview that:

…on Weibo, many things are not included in the range of topics that can be discussed, such as sex, politics, certain periods of history, etc.. If they are not discussable, how can we have quality discussions about these issues? Sure, there are lots of discussions about gossip of celebrities, but they have nothing to do with values and social standards for right and wrong, what is the point of these discussions?

在微博这个平台上，有很多东西是没有纳入到可以讨论的范畴的，……，比如说，性不能讨论，政治不能讨论，好多的历史不能讨论，如果这些都不能讨论，怎么能有关于有质量的讨论？的确，现在网上有许多关于名人八卦的讨论，可那种东西不存在什么观点和对与错的标准的问题嘛，那这些讨论有什么意义？
Zeqing also commented that:

The information censorship limited the way I see the world. Because I know the world mainly through my grasp of information, but this behaviour of the government restricted my access to information, it will further affect my views of different issues.

这种信息审查它限制了我怎么看世界。因为我看世界的一个主要的方式是靠自己对信息和资讯的一个掌握，但是政府的这种行为限制住了我对于信息和资讯的掌握，就会影响到我对事情的看法。

In addition to using censorship, the government employs internet commentators to guide and build online public opinion by making pro-government comments online (Han, 2015; Philipp, 2015). These commentators are referred to by the internet users the “WuMao” (五毛), which means “fifty cents”35. A recent study estimates that Chinese authorities fabricate and post about 448 million pro-government comments a year in political and policy debates on Chinese social media (King et al., 2017). The online content generated by the WuMao has the potential to distort the online picture of Chinese society, and to misrepresent the practice and content of citizenship, negatively affecting the learning of internet users through the online community.

In addition, these commentators can muddle the focus of online discussions of social issues by making irrelevant comments or generating conflicting emotions in the community. In this way,

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35 It is said that they are paid 50 cents by the government for each pro-government comment they make on the internet (Hung, 2010).
rational discussions can be diverted into emotional contests between people with different opinions. Online discussion becomes ineffective quarrelling, which offers little potential for learning. This effect of government-employed internet commentators is identified by King et al. (2017) as one of the aims of the massive fabrication of online posts by Chinese authorities. The authors describe this aim as avoiding confrontation with skeptics in the party and the government, and disrupting the public discussion of controversial social and political issues.

**Learning barriers posed by the market**

On the market side, the commercialisation of social media platforms could pose a threat to the acquisition of legitimacy of internet users’ participation in the online community. To maximise business revenue, commercial advertisements and promotions saturate every possible corner of social media platforms. The Weibo platform, which acquired its popularity among Chinese internet users by offering an online space for public discussion of social affairs, is trying to incorporate more functions, such as online payments, instant messaging, and games, to generate more revenue from its users. This may undermine its function as an established platform for public discussion and as a source of social learning for internet users. Lingzi explicitly expressed her disappointment with this transformation of Weibo, saying that “It was originally an excellent ‘light application’, but now its content and functions are numerous and jumbled” (它本来是个很好的轻应用，但是现在太庞杂了). She prefers a simpler Weibo, which could be a “light application” (轻应用), dedicated to providing a space for public discussion. She hopes Weibo could be a space able to accommodate both small clubs and a big plaza. It could function as a social venue for the formation of all kinds of small communities when there are no big social events or topics on the public agenda, but could also serve as a forum for public discussion around major social events.
What is even worse is that there is always a gap between the list of social news items and issues on the actual public agenda and the list of hot topics reflected on the homepage of Weibo. Hot topics shown on the right-hand side of the homepage of Weibo are usually “safe” topics, such as entertainment news, which have no relation to current political and social issues on the public agenda, issues that may lead to criticism of the government. This is because of the unique organisational hierarchy of internet service provision and revenue flows under the regulation of the Ministry of Information Industry of China. In China, the main internet infrastructure was constructed by a state-owned company regulated by the government. Independent service providers (ISPs) need to lease this infrastructure to provide their internet services. Compliance with government requirements for online content censorship has therefore become a precondition for these ISPs to run their businesses and services in China (Damm & Thomas, 2006). As a result, the Chinese internet is a government-regulated commercial space to a large extent (Fu, 2015).

This organisational hierarchy in the Chinese internet, which prioritizes the interests of Chinese authorities and the commercial interests of ISPs, may lead to ISP self-censorship of the content on their platforms and pose a barrier to accessing a broader range of online information and activities. Some businesses and individuals design marketing activities to gain public attention or promote their popularity among internet users. These activities usually achieve their aim by taking advantage of people’s concerns about certain social issues. Internet users, after realising they have been used, are less likely to engage in the future in online activities relevant to the social problems about which they are concerned, hampering their citizenship learning through online engagement.
Learning barriers faced by Chinese internet users

From the user side, the large size of the online population and its high level of engagement with online communities represents a unique opportunity for the internet to function as a venue for the development of a well-informed public in China. At the same time, the enormous disparity between users in terms of their purpose for using the internet, their levels of digital literacy and education, and their understandings of online communities, may also jeopardise people’s access to this community for learning.

The most frequently mentioned online behaviour which holds participants back from participating online is engaged in by Penzi (喷子)\(^\text{36}\). Their behaviour involves adopting over-simplified and opinionated standards to judge and categorise people online. Those who practise this behaviour reveal little tolerance for different opinions and tend to attack those who have them, often using foul language without showing that they have taken care to understand the meaning of other people’s expressions. They do not participate in serious or rational discussion; catharsis, expressing extreme ideas and opinions, and attacking those whose opinions are opposite to or different from theirs are their primary purposes.

Participants in this study are aware of this behaviour, some of them having had the experience of being attacked. Xianyu is from the city of Jinan in Shandong Province (eastern China). He studies at a local university as a sophomore and lives with his family. He likes travelling and photography. When the interview was conducted, he was busy organising his visa for travelling to Taiwan. He has been using Instagram to hold an archive of his photographic work for a long

\(^{36}\) *Penzi* is a derogatory word similar to internet troll. It is used by internet users to refer to those who sows discord on the internet by posting provocative, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community (like water ejected from a fire hydrant), with the purpose of disrupting an ongoing discussion or upsetting people.
time. After the platform was blocked in 2014, he had to use a Virtual Private Network\(^{37}\) (VPN) to continue this archiving habit, but he said it is worthwhile because he can maintain a consistent portfolio by doing so. In the interview, he said that he was an active participant in online discussion about social issues when was in high school, but now he tends to express less because “there are too many Penzi online”, and he does not want to be targeted by these people. Xianyu’s comment testifies to the effect of internet trolls in discouraging people’s willingness to participate in public discussions on Weibo and forcing the withdrawal of those who have a genuine will to learn about Chinese society through their engagement with the Weibo community.

Another group of internet users whose behaviour undermines the internet as a supportive community for citizenship learning among its users is the group called by internet users “Ziganwu” (自干五), which means voluntary Wumao (Han, 2015). These users voluntarily defend the regime by criticising or surveilling other users’ online comments. Although people’s online remarks are unlikely to put them in danger these days (some of the participants even said they enjoy playing the game of testing the line of censorship by posting certain keywords or content which are regarded as sensitive), knowing that their online comments are surveilled by the Ziganwu group can still dim their enthusiasm for online participation.

As observed by Poell and van Dijck (2016) in relation to contemporary activism, online public spaces are fundamentally transient because they are shaped by state governance and the techno-commercial strategies of social media corporations. They are not public spaces readily available for citizens and activists to use; instead they need to be conquered and constructed by the long process of mass creating and sharing of protest material by citizens and activists, a

\(^{37}\)VPN is a service that allows internet users to connect to the internet via a server run by a VPN provider. All data travelling between users’ devices and the VPN server is securely encrypted (Crawford, 2016). It is often used by Chinese internet users to access foreign websites which are blocked in China, such as Facebook and Twitter.
process through which emotional connectivity among citizens is established. This transient feature of online public space is also characteristic of people’s citizenship learning on the Chinese internet. Online communities are not communities that citizens may readily claim, but are (re)constructed and maintained through their constructive online practices.

**Conclusion**

This chapter analysed participants’ activities on Weibo as a form of social learning about their citizenship. It has also served to paint a brief portrait of participants’ lives and their relationship to their online practices. The learning that occurs on Weibo happens on two intertwined levels. The first is their learning of online citizenship through their engagement with the Weibo community. They learn about this citizenship by making sense of the practices of the Weibo community and contributing to shaping these practices through their engagement with the community. In this sense, participants’ online engagement as a form of citizenship learning is not only a process through which they learn about the practices of the online community, but also a formative process which spawns new modes of citizenship practice.

These practices are reflected in participants’ perceptions about expectations of the online community for their mutual engagement which consists of a set of online language practices, norms, attitudes and values. The practices of the Weibo community are coordinated by a joint enterprise which aims to construct an equal and tolerant space, rich in reliable information and diversified opinion. These practices in the Weibo community as perceived by participants illustrate their understanding of their rights, duties, and identity in relation to the Weibo community, and enable them to claim and practise their online citizenship in their daily engagement with other users on Weibo.
The second level of learning is the learning of Chinese citizenship online. At this level, Weibo functions as a boundary object which mediates and extends participants’ engagement with and learning about Chinese society. It facilitates participants’ learning about Chinese society but also requires their contribution to keep it alive. In this sense, this form of mediated citizenship learning constitutes a new form of citizenship practice characterised by a give-and-take process. Through reconciling internet-mediated social learning and learning that occurs through direct engagement with communities in physical life, participants not only learn about their citizenship in relation to Chinese society but also deepen their understanding of their online citizenship.

The citizenship learning of young people means acquisition of “an understanding of how they are positioned and what this means for their participation” in society (Wyn, 1995, p. 61). All the social learning of participants produces a deep and thorough understanding of Chinese society which is composed of their knowledge of the practices in both virtual and physical communities with which they engage in their everyday lives. Weibo in this process is a learning object in its own right (the practices of which define participants’ online citizenship), and a medium that enables participants to learn about the practices of other social communities by which their Chinese citizenship is defined. It also needs to be noted that the extent to which this form of citizenship learning can be realised is subject to a range of barriers interposed by the state, the market, and some groups of Chinese internet users. Despite these barriers, participants in this study are eager to engage in discovering different forms of social participation that can enhance new ways of being that will help them understand the constantly evolving society in which they are growing up.
Chapter 6 Online Citizenship Practice and Identity

Introduction

This chapter examines participants’ citizenship practices as their identity work. Against a backdrop of fragmentation and realignment of identification in today’s globalised, localised, and virtualised world, identity has become central to citizenship studies. Influenced by poststructuralist approaches to identity, this chapter examines how identity performances were staged by participants to form and maintain their identities in relation to different social contexts.

I first explore participants’ accounts of online activities as identity performance, then investigate how participants perform their online identity (as a member of the Weibo community) within the language practices, norms and discourses of the Weibo site. I argue that these performances reveal practices associated with the formation of their online citizenship (that is, citizenship in relation to the Weibo community).

I then analyse the research participants’ online performances of identity in different social contexts. The results suggest that their identity performance across different social media platforms are informed by: a) their perceptions of online space as private or public, and b) their use of online space to extend identity performance to their pre-existing social network or to distance their identity performance from this network. I argue that participants experience different senses of belonging by flexibly appropriating the affordances of social media platforms for identity performance; these senses of belonging play a key role in forming and sustaining their identities, and enable a flexible experience of multiple citizenships in relation to different social contexts.
Performance from participants’ perspectives

As stated in chapter 2, participants’ online identity work is analysed in this thesis through a poststructuralist lens. In this tradition, identity is a multiple, fluid, and context-dependent operation (Rattansi & Phoenix, 2005). Our identities are created and maintained by our discursive representations and repetitive performances (Hey 2006). They are formed through active learning and performing according to collectively agreed social norms and discourses in order to be ‘normal’ or ‘appropriate’ (Cahill et al., 2015).

Because identity is constructed through everyday performances, recognition of identity performances is another essential mechanism of identity formation within a poststructuralist tradition. Such recognition is based on the interactions between audience and player, with both sides functioning as observer and observed at the same time (Cahill et al., 2015). Recognition is given in accordance with a reference point constructed from people’s pre-existing ideas which may include beliefs, values and commitments, and a corresponding set of attitudes and dispositions (Gewirtz and Cribb 2009). It can forge a division between us and them (ibid.), and makes identity an ‘inherently social’ concept which thrives on both difference and similarity (Davies 2006).

Social media can be a rich source of diverse information, opinions, and values. It can open an accessible space for users to explore the possibilities of their roles, commitments and values, and to form their identities by experimenting with and performing these possibilities. A wide range of avenues for online identity performance, including social media profiles, list of accounts one follows on social media, as well as online posts and comments, are documented in the literature (Adelman, Franco, & Pires, 2015; Stern, 2008; Wang, 2012). The participants of this study performed their identities through more or less similar channels to those identified
in this literature. They all attached great importance to building up an online image, a process which can be viewed as identity performance.

The importance of identity performances was illustrated by the deliberation involved in participants’ setting up of social media profiles. A social media profile is how internet users reveal a wide range of personal information, such as details of their personality, interests, values, and even their private problems and struggles. Participants’ online profiles are fashioned by humorous and creative self-descriptions. Typical examples include: “psychopath + neuropath” (精神病+神经病), “realistic idealist, this is the best of times, this is the worst of times” (现实的理想主义者，这是最好的时代，也是最坏的时代), “Turns out I am living a happy life, only I did not realise it” (原来过得很快乐，只我一人未发觉), and “I was not intended to be different, but what can I do with my exceptional taste?” (我本无心与众不同，怎奈品味如此出众). The humorous and narcissistic character of these self-descriptions is formulated in accordance with the typical language practice for self-expression on Weibo (see chapter 5). These performances contribute to forming participants’ identities as Weibo users.

In parallel with their performance of online identity by adopting online language practices, participants also use their social media pages as sites for performing their identity in physical life. Jiahao is 23 years old, an architect from Xi’an. He graduated from a college of architecture in Beijing in 2015, and started working at an architecture studio the same year. He shares a rented apartment with his friend in Beijing. It was not his original plan to start working right after graduation. He intended to take a short break, organise a portfolio of his design work, and think about what to do next, but an opportunity came up at an architecture studio started by a friend, so he joined this studio and started work on a project. When I contacted him for interview, he was busy working for the project and frequently needed to work overtime. He sometimes stays at the studio till midnight. My interview with him started at 10 pm (Beijing
time) after he arrived home, a time which, according to him, is early compared to most of his days on the job.

Jiahao maintains a stylish Weibo page with an artistic template. The content on his page consists mainly of shared links to foreign music, artworks, design pictures of fashion, cars and architecture, and his graffiti works. I gained access to his site through a comment he made on Weibo under a news report of an illegal construction, realising that, although he referred to that report in order to criticize the illegal behaviour, he did not forward it to his homepage on Weibo\(^{38}\). When I asked him why he did not, he said “because it does not go with my aesthetic taste” (因为我觉得那个不够符合我的审美品位). Jiahao’s concern for maintaining a consistent aesthetic taste on his social media homepage shows the significance of this online space for the formation and maintenance of his identity as an architect. All of his repetitive and discursive performances on Weibo and in his physical life contribute to and consolidate his identity as an architect.

The content participants generate on Weibo is part of their identity performance. Zhangguai, for example, who frequently satirises wrongdoings of government officials and antisocial behaviours of other citizens, said explicitly that all the content on his Weibo page is a way of \textit{tiebiaoqian} (贴标签, labelling himself), and of constructing an image he wants others to see. When asked about the purpose of this self-labeling, he said, “It can let strangers know me, and if they think my posts are funny, then it may mean we are like drawn to like” (可以让其他人了解我，如果他们觉得我发的这个东西还有点儿意思，那就说明可能有点儿臭味相投). This practice resonates with Papacharissi’s (2012) analysis of Twitter users’ self-

\(^{38}\) For each comment a user makes on Weibo, there is an option under the input box which says repost to my own Weibo page” for users to choose. If a user ticks this box, the comment and the original Weibo post will be reposted to the user’s Weibo page. Otherwise the user’s comment will only appear in the comment area under the original Weibo post.
performance through trending hashtags. In her study, she found that the tone of people’s tweets varied according to the topical nature of the hashtag these tweets included. This suggests that Twitter users adjust their expressions according to their perceptions of the conversation they are going to have with other users who are contributing to the same hashtag. In this sense, users’ comments on social media are not merely self-representation or a simple wish to have a voice online; they are an avenue for performing a self and reflecting a lifestyle with the purpose of seeking identification with like-minded people from unknown online publics. This practice relates to a notion of identity-formation within the space of a community that reinforces that identity. This is an iterative, dynamic and relational process that involves oneself and other community members in an iterative process.

The idea of performing identity through generating content on a social media page is shared by other participants. Duanyi, 23 years old, lives with her family in Beijing. She finished her undergraduate study at a local university and started her work at Vidal Sassoon as a public relations manager a year ago. She is responsible for implementing brand promotion activities and acting as liaison with print and internet media. She normally arrives home between 8 and 9 pm on weekdays, then spends about 1 to 2 hours browsing Weibo and WeChat before she goes to sleep. She sees the maintenance of her Weibo page as a way of establishing an online “brand/trademark/image” (品牌/形象). In the interview, she commented that:

What I do on Weibo is a way of building up an image of myself as if working on a personal brand, you do it through posting certain content or communicating certain attitudes, it has more potential audience, because even for those I do not know, they can find me by searching some keywords online.

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39 VS Sassoon is an international company offering hair care and styling products.
微博对于我更多的是一种如同打造个人品牌一样的树立个人形象的活动，你通过发布一些内容或表达某种态度，怎么说，就是传播力度可能更大，因为，即使我不认识的人，他们也可以不知道哪天搜索什么关键词能搜索到我。

Cimi also said that maintaining her Weibo page is like building up an “online name-card” (网络名片) for herself.

Although participants describe the motivation for their activities on Weibo differently, it is clear that participants’ accounts of their social media pages are directed to the construction of an image to be seen by other internet users. This image is established by their continuous exploring and performing of roles, commitments, interests and values with which they can identify. This process is described by Marwick (2010) as individuals’ “self-branding” on social media which aims to create an “edited self” that they want seen or promoted. It works as a performance, reaching out to those in the unknown online publics who may share interests or values with them. Their performances make it possible for them to find peers from whom they can seek recognition. In the meantime, by viewing other people’s performances, they can give recognition to those with which they identify, and then connect and communicate with them; hence social media is used by participants as a space for identity performance and mutual recognition of this performance. The repetitive performance on Weibo and the recognition participants give/get from other Weibo users play a significant role in their identity formation.

Participants seem to share the view that the internet, as a virtual space for people’s self-presentation, communication and connection, affords new possibilities for their identity performances. In terms of adopting the affordances of social media for identity performances
and recognition, participants in this study did not appear to be much different from their counterparts in other countries; however, as a context-dependent concept, the investigation of online identity performance cannot be separated from the socio-cultural communities in which it occurs. In this research, the new possibilities of identity performance afforded by the internet are illustrated by participants’ online activities in two inter-related dimensions which I refer to as performance of online identity (as a member of the Weibo community) and identity performance online (performance of multiple identities in online spaces). In the next two sections I elaborate on participants’ online identity performance in these two dimensions.

**Performance of online identity**

Participants’ performance of online identity is conducted through aligning their online expression to the culture of the online community with which they engage. The culture of the community, which consists of a set of norms, values, expectations and specific language practices, is shaped by and also shapes the engagement activities of its members in the community. It functions as an important source of recognition of internet users’ identity performance in this virtual space. This performance, overtime, forms their identity as a member of this online community. In this sense, users’ engagement in the online space generates a new identity which can be called their online identity.

The online identity of the participants in this study is formed through their performances, mediated by their understanding of the practices, norms and discourses of the Weibo community. First of all, their performances of online identity are conducted according to the practices of the Weibo community, as explored in the previous chapter. These practices embrace the expectations of the community for “nutritious” and “interesting” content, shared values and attitudes for mutual engagement between its members, and the joint enterprise of
the Weibo community. Their adherence to these practices in their online identity performances on Weibo contributes to the formation of their online identity.

In addition, participants in the Weibo community share the “decidedly informal and creative” feature of Chinese internet culture which makes the Chinese internet a “hilarious and delightful place full of jokes, parodies and puns (Yang et al., 2014, p. 204). This style is epitomised by participants’ usage of satire (including humour, irony, sarcasm, exaggeration, and mockery), a popular tool employed by Chinese internet users to express their dissatisfaction with and criticisms of social and political issues (Meng, 2011; Yang, 2009).

Zhangguai once forwarded a news report from a sports channel which was about a meeting Chinese president Xi Jinping had with International Olympic Committee president Thomas Bach. The report highlighted the three questions Xi asked Bach, which included when the Chinese national football team could get into the finals of the world cup, when China could host the FIFA world cup, and when the Chinese national football team would win the world cup. He forwarded this news report to his own Weibo page and commented, “How could he (means Xi) ask such irrational questions? He really made me worry about the future of this country” (这人居然能问出这么丧失理智的问题，真让人为国家前途捏了一把汗啊). In this comment, the word irrational has two layers of meaning. First, it is irrational to have high hopes for a Chinese national football team. This meaning is about teasing the Chinese national football team for its consistently poor performances in various international matches. Because of their poor performances, the Chinese national football team has been one of the most popular objects of ridicule among Chinese internet users. Second, the ‘irrational’ questions raised by the Xi made him suspicious of Xi’s ability to lead the country. This is intended to tease the political leader, also a popular source of amusement among Chinese internet users. Moreover, by saying that Xi’s questions made him worry about the future of the country, he seemed to
have taken on a responsibility for it, something he has no capacity to do. Through this self-mockery and ironic expression, he delicately expressed his criticism of the country’s authoritarian political system in which political leaders determine everything and common citizens have little say in determining the future of their country.

Apart from satire, participants also perform their identities as members of the Chinese online community by frequently adopting scatological terminology in their online expression. This practice, often as apparent in puns and wordplays, is another pervasive cultural feature of the China’s internet (Yang et al., 2014). Xianyu wrote the following on his Weibo page: “对这个操蛋的社会操碎了心”. This sentence can be understood in two different ways depending on the pronunciation of the second “操” (cao) which is a polyphone. When it is pronounced in the first tone it means care about something, which makes the meaning of the sentence: “I am exhausted by caring so much about this terrible society”. When pronounced in the fourth tone, the meaning of the sentence becomes: “my heart was fucked up by this terrible society”.

In the interview, he said he used this polyphone intentionally to turn his comment into a pun. He wanted to express two layers of meaning: to express his disappointment with the corruption and other socio-political problems in Chinese society, and his powerlessness about this situation; and to express his caring about this society through his post, because “no matter how terrible this society is, I still want to take my responsibility, pray for it, and find the way to solve its problems, especially for those who are at the bottom of the society” (不论这个社会再怎么操蛋，你也会去为它分担，会为它祈祷，会为它解答，尤其是为那些处在社会底层的人).
Similarly, Xiaomeng expressed his disappointment on Weibo as he saw the outcome of the Lianghui (National People’s Congress and People’s Political Consultative Conference) in Beijing. The Weibo post says that:

The meeting is over, the banquet is finished. Did not see much discussion about people’s livelihood related issues such as education, environmental protection, finance and taxation, household registration, family planning, etc., but they did manage to produce a reform program for football development... looks like this “ball thing” is actually more important!

Hold the meeting finished, dinner also finished. Environmental protection, finance, household registration, family planning, etc. did not discuss much about people’s livelihood, but did manage to produce a football development reform... looks like this “ball thing” is actually more important!

In this post, the word “ball thing”, which is a literal translation of the Chinese word “球事”, is a pun. It can mean “football-related matters”, here referring to the reform program for football development arising from the discussions of representatives at Lianghui, while also having another layer of implicit meaning. Since the character “球” (ball) is a homophone of another Chinese character meaning penis, the word “球事” can also be understood as “penis thing”, which is a vulgar way to say insignificant stuff, not worthy of notice. Xiaomeng uses this vulgar expression to express his dissatisfaction with the Lianghui which focused on some insignificant matters and failed to address urgent issues related to people’s livelihoods.

Use of scatology is a longstanding language practice of the Chinese internet. Many popular puns and wordplays on the Chinese internet epitomize this practice. One example is the word “pimin” (屁民, shitizen). It originated when a drunken Communist Party of China (CPC) cadre
called ordinary people around him “pi” (屁, fart) to show his superiority over such insignificant people. The word was widely adopted by many internet users in reference to themselves to express “a widely shared sense of powerlessness and disenfranchisement felt by ordinary Chinese citizens” (Yang et al., 2014, p. 207). Another typical case is the word “diaosi” (屌丝, dick string), a word used extensively among relatively young urban Chinese as a name to call themselves. The popularity of this word has led to a cultural phenomenon in Chinese society. It illustrates young people’s perception of themselves as “the underprivileged and the losers in a society that is undergoing rapid economic growth but also treacherous social stratification” (ibid, p. 208).

Language is essential to performativity because it describes doing, as well as emotions and feelings, and also presents a form of doing (Austin, 1975). The usage of satire and the scatology language practice on the Chinese internet is a form of informal, creative, and sometimes also ‘coarse’ and ‘vulgar’ expression (Yang et al., 2014, p. 206). It offers a subversive political contrast to the official language of political communication endorsed by the CPC party-state, a rigid and formalized language saturated with propaganda and ideological rhetoric (ibid.). Participants’ adoption of this subversive language practice in their online expression is a way to perform their identity as a proficient member of the Chinese online community. The recognition they give to or get from other individuals who share a similar language practice generates an intimate connection between them, facilitating the formation and maintenance of their online identities.

The impact of language practices, behavioural norms and expectations in the Weibo community in shaping participants’ performance of their online identity is evident. In order to be recognized by others as a Weibo user, participants feel obliged to formulate their performances of online identity according to the Chinese internet culture. They make an effort to express their opinions in a humorous way, try to embed parodies, puns and sarcasm into their
posts, and use popular online lexicons which have tacit meanings among internet users. This disposition is well illustrated by the comments of Xiaoyu and Zhangguai in the interviews. Xiaoyu said that:

…(views and opinions) which are expressed in a satirical or teasing manner are definitely more likely to be accepted online; the more serious your online expression gets, the less attention you will be likely to receive. I myself also want to express in this way, and I am actually trying to do so, but I guess I am just not capable enough to do so. I wish I could write things that people find interesting when they read it.

以那种调侃的口气说的观点，大家肯定会比较容易接受，你越是一本正经的，大家越会觉得不太关注。我自己也想那样去表达，而且也在尝试着去这样做，但可能我这方面的表达能力还不够吧。我就像，我要是写出来的东西能让人觉得很有趣，很有画面感就好啦。

Zhangguai stated in his interview that:

I want the stuff I posted to be interesting to read, even when the thing I want to talk about is horrible, I still want to make it into a humorous/ironic expression with a punchline, it seemed to me an affectedly unconventional behaviour at the beginning, but now it has become a subconscious habit, you simply feel it is very tedious and boring if you say something as it is without a bit of teasing or bantering, and I am not the only one, my friends also feel the same way.
我希望我发的东西看起来尽量有趣，哪怕这事儿我就是觉得特别操蛋，我也会尽量的想办法用一个抖包袱的方式把它说出来，这东西多年以前可能是一种特别矫情，特别想这么干，到现在就变成一个下意识的一个习惯了，就觉得不调侃一下，用大白话的方式说出来，就总觉得特别没劲，就是我身边，或者说我好多朋友其实都是这样。

These two quotes show explicitly how study participants are subjected to the norms and discourses of online expression in order to be recognized as insiders, and how they are transforming themselves into online citizens. The alignment of participants’ identity performance with the practices, norms and discourses in the Weibo community shows their identification with the community culture as well as their competence in participating in and practising within this culture. This performance as an insider of the Weibo space forms their identity as an online citizen. This citizenship enables them to appropriate the internet as a venue to perform their different identities, which leads to the second dimension of their online identity performance.

Performing identities online

The second dimension of participants’ online identity performance is their online performance of identities to audiences from different social networks. This performance occurs concurrently with their performance of online identity. The extensive use of satire and other language practices referred to above not only contributes to the formation of their online identity, but is also essential to the formation of their identities in different social networks.

Satire, for instance, has long served a fundamental role in forming collective identities (Mazzei, 2016). Apart from using this language practice in their online expression as part of their performance in forming their identity as a proficient member of the Chinese online community,
being able to create, understand, and share the satire *per se* is a performance of their identities in relation to different social networks with which they engage in their everyday lives. Since recognition and appreciation of satire entails common ground (such as values, positions, knowledge and interests) shared by sarcastic speakers and listeners, being able to understand a satire is a performance of this shared ground. It is also a source of mutual recognition between people who can understand the same satire; hence, satire can be used to subtly identify people with common traits that allow the speaker to “make friends, forge alliances, and navigate complex social networks” (Biscontini, 2016). This performance and recognition process includes/excludes one as a member of a collective identity. The network established in the process of generating and understanding satire provides a solid base for collective identity formation.

Similarly, the scatology frequently seen in participants’ online expressions is not merely a performance of online identity through aligning self-expression to the informal, creative and often “vulgar” language practice on the Chinese internet (Yang et al., 2014); it shows, more importantly, a shared rejection of highly normalized, state-sponsored, political communication saturated with propaganda and ideological rhetoric (Boyer & Yurchak, 2010). It is also an expression of discontent arising from a widely shared self-perception among urban youth as powerless and disenfranchised Chinese citizens, left behind by rapid economic growth and treacherous social stratification as the underprivileged and the losers (Yang et al., 2014). This shared position and self-perception is the source of the recognition given to their identity performances online.

Young people’s participation in creating, understanding and sharing satire and scatological expressions, especially their self-identification with those scatological identity labels in their online expression, such as *pimin* and *diaosi*, is the performance through which they experience
a sense of belonging to the community of people who share similar self-perceptions. These satirical and scatological expressions can also be regarded as scathing criticisms of Chinese society and of the way it appears to be heading. These self-perceptions and criticisms illuminate their understanding of what it means to be a Chinese citizen, providing a “dynamic edge along which innovative negotiations and imaginations of the very meaning of being Chinese are taking shape” (Yang et al., 2014, p. 211).

In order to understand participants’ online performances of identities, it is necessary to further explore how they perform their identities in different social contexts presented online and what these performances tell us about their identity in current Chinese society. The internet in this case is not only a diverse space in which people present different identities in materialised forms, such as text, pictures and videos, but also a channel through which these identity performances access their intended audiences from different social networks.

Participants actively perform their identities on the internet through sharing life moments, posting or forwarding content on their interests, and performing their values by making comments about social and political issues and events. These performances are by no means random however. Participants perform identities differently on Weibo and WeChat, using definite strategies for navigating their identity work across these two platforms. Rules, norms and expectations differ in each platform, simultaneously shaping their identity practices and identity formation. In what follows, I discuss the two principles used to inform their strategies in navigating their identity work across different social media platforms, namely, a reconstructed division between private and public, and their appropriation of online space as supplementary to or distant from their identities in relation to pre-existing social networks.
**Private versus public**

The first principle that informs participants’ navigation of identity work across Weibo and WeChat is their perception of these spaces as private or public. The notion of privacy can be understood on different levels. From a legal perspective, it can be interpreted as control over personal spaces and information (Katsh, 1989), but this interpretation implies a universal dichotomy between private and public by assuming the existence of “generic privacy” (Lambert, 2013). It fails to account for the “social entanglement of both people and information” (ibid., p. 29). Altman (1983) argues that privacy involves controlling the relative boundaries of a social space to close and open up access to certain information. Because information is full of subjective and inter-subjective meaning (Nissenbaum, 2004), and the boundaries between private and public are always fluid, some information which can be treated as public in one social context/situation may be private in another (Lambert, 2013).

The division between private and public in this study draws on a social understanding of privacy. In this vein, privacy is considered in relation to specific social contexts. It is experienced through separating social contexts from one another by considering different information norms shaped by various factors, such as history, culture, and convention (Nissenbaum, 2004). Nissenbaum (2004) posits two types of informational norms through which privacy is maintained. One is the norm of appropriateness which stipulates what information about persons is appropriate to reveal in a particular context. The other is the norm of distribution which regulates the distribution of information from one party to another, or to others. Specifically, the maintenance of privacy is collectively determined by the nature of the social context and the information in this context, by the receivers of the information in this context and their relationships with information subjects, and by the terms under which the information is shared by the subject, that is, further disseminated (Nissenbaum, 2004).
The integration of the internet in people’s everyday life adds another layer of complexity to the issue of privacy. Apart from the challenge big internet companies pose to individual privacy on an institutional level, online social media platforms also collapse or converge the boundaries between public and private. They reshape people’s perception of privacy on a social level by creating both opportunities and challenges for people’s experience of publicity, privacy and sociality (Papacharissi, 2012; Raynes-Goldie, 2010). Sawyer et al. (2011) argues that the self-disclosure of users on social network sites is moderated by their perceptions of how public these sites are. Livingstone (2008) observes that students try to manage the boundary between publicity and privacy on the internet as a way to balance their privacy concerns against the social benefit of online visibility. They experience different senses of privacy through controlling the relative boundaries of social spaces which close/open up others’ access to the information they disclose online.

As mentioned before, Weibo and WeChat are designed for different communicative purposes. As a mobile application designed for communication among users who physically know each other, WeChat is more of a private platform in the traditional sense because it affords a closed space in which participants are connected with their pre-existing social networks. Weibo is designed as an open and public platform for people’s sharing, discussion and networking. Posts of Weibo users are visible to literally any internet users. These platforms are employed differently by participants in their identity work however.

Most of participants actively share text, pictures and short video clips in the ‘Moments’ space on WeChat. These are normally funny or happy moments and experiences, and can be called ‘lightweight’ content (Ito & Okabe, 2005). Such content may include pictures of a good meal, a beautiful scene, or a catch-up with friends, content that is free of personal values. It is innocuous content, suitable for public scrutiny by people from different social contexts in their physical lives. The content participants post on Weibo, however, reflects issues more complex than mere happy moments. It includes the commentary on the ideological and political values
they hold, the struggles and confusions they experience, and the emotions they are releasing. This content, along with the opinions and comments they post on their Weibo page as they participate in online discussions about various social and political issues, illustrates the evolving trajectory of their values and beliefs, called by them Xinlu Licheng (心路历程, the spiritual journey of their life). These records, which previously existed only in people’s private diaries, are now being kept on a platform designed for public and open communication.

This different usage of the design functions of Weibo and WeChat was explained in interviews. In the early stages of using WeChat, some participants intended to duplicate the boundaries between private and public in their physical life on WeChat. Duanyi (a public relations manager in Beijing) said she wanted to restrict her contacts on WeChat to family and friends, and to exclude work contacts, but the great convenience of WeChat for interpersonal communication precluded that. “These days, when people meet for the first time, instead of asking for a telephone number, they ask for WeChat ID” (现在，人们第一次见面都不留电话了，都变成加微信了), she commented. When all of a person’s acquaintances are present on the same platform, it is no longer feasible on that platform to maintain the time and spatial barriers between social contexts (such as work and off-work) which make privacy possible. WeChat became a space without a sense of place (Meyrowitz, 1985). As a result, in order to avoid the possible collapse of different social contexts, users are more likely to use WeChat as a public space to record the public side of their lives, the side which is viewable by all the people they know in their physical life.

On Weibo, however, apart from a small number of participants’ followers who are their close friends in physical life, the majority of followers are unknown to them in physical life. They became their followers simply because they found the content on participants’ Weibo pages interesting or informative, or they shared similar interests and values with participants. This feature of the participants’ audience offers them a sense of privacy in the Weibo space. Privacy
here does not merely mean keeping information to oneself or taking advantage of structural limitations to accessing certain content. On social media, the existence of networked publics, a term boyd (2008) uses to describe ‘the spaces and audiences that are bound together through technological networks’ (p. 125), literally subverts the possibility of enforcing structured borders to information. Privacy is frequently redefined by social context. Stern (2008) found in her study of young people’s personal websites that ‘young authors think of their communication as private when the people they know in real life do not see, hear, or read it, regardless of who else does’ (p. 104).

Similar concepts of privacy were found among participants in this study. Shenqi is a 27 year old investment consultant who works at a bank in Guangzhou. His hometown is Zhanjiang, a city at the southwestern end of Guangdong province (417 kilometers away from Guangzhou), but he currently lives at his uncle’s home in Guangzhou. He finished his undergraduate study at a university in Zhuhai\(^{40}\), and studied for his master degree in international finance in the UK. The internet for him is mainly a place to access the latest financial and economic news, but he also follows a few online forums about architectural design and cars, his personal interests. He commented in the interview that:

> Weibo has become a private fairyland to me. You can say whatever you want on your Weibo page, not many people care about what you said on it, it seems that nobody will see it, and those who saw it, they do not know you, so they are like do not exist, I am pretty relaxed.

\(^{40}\) A modern city in China’s southern Guangdong province which borders Macau. It was one of China’s first Special Economic Zones, declared in 1980.
Duanyi described a similar experience of privacy on Weibo:

I wrote it for myself, not for others, even if it was seen by other people online, because I do not know them in my real life, so it does not matter.

我是为自己写的，不为别人，就算网上其他人看到了，因为我在生活中不认识他们，所以就没关系。

In his study of online forums, Kitzmann (2004) used the term ‘connected privacy’ to describe places with permeable boundaries, those which allow people inside the boundaries to interact with those from outside, and argues that it is these insecure boundaries that make privacy possible. In the case of Weibo communication, although the posts of participants are visible to all the internet users, the fact that they do not know each other in physical life forms the insecure boundary which makes connected privacy possible. The invisibility of these audiences, unknown to Weibo users in their physical life, provides them with a sense of safety, enabling their identity performance in this space to go beyond the expectations or norms of their pre-existing social networks, and allowing them to divulge more personal feelings, thoughts and values. Similar practices were adopted by participants in boyd (2014) study. One posted messages he wanted to broadcast widely on Facebook while sharing ‘whatever intimate thoughts were on his mind on Twitter’ (p. 204).
Participants’ experience of privacy on Weibo also speaks to Simmel’s (1950) notion of the stranger: people socially distant from a person’s existing social connections. Because strangers can listen without judgement and cannot pass on the information to other figures in one’s social circle, they make ideal subjects with whom people can share secrets and emotions in an informal manner. Participants’ access to strangers on Weibo provides them with a safe stage on which to perform their values, struggles and emotions without jeopardizing their relationships with and image in their pre-existing social networks. Based on their practice of identity performance and mutual recognition with strangers on Weibo, participants connect with like-minded people to form a community in which they can experience a form of emotional support that they cannot experience in their physical life (Wang, 2013).

Knowing that they are only loosely connected with their followers rather than bound to them by actual social relationships in physical life, participants remarked that they do not expect much response from their followers on Weibo; however, most of them acknowledged that the feedback given by audiences who share similar values or experiences on Weibo is encouraging for their identity performance on that platform. This feedback, which can be as simple as a short comment or a Like, is the way recognition is practised in Weibo communities; it can provide acknowledgement of and motivation for their identity performances. Due to the sense of privacy they experienced on Weibo, participants also tended to treat Weibo as a space to keep some personal diaries. In this sense, they feel less pressure from the norms and discourses in the Weibo community in performing their identities.

Online as supplementary to or distant from identity in pre-existing social networks

The second principle that informs young people’s navigation of identity work across different social media platforms is their need to feel an immediate connection to or distance from their pre-existing social network. Normally people’s homepage on social media is understood as a site for identity performance according to the norms and expectations of different contexts (Buckingham, 2008). Like any other performances which vary according to the specific context
(Coté, 2009), online identity performances of participants are heterogeneous according to the features of different social media spaces, including the audiences users can access in these spaces. Resonating with the study of Valentine and Holloway (2002), participants’ identity performances on social media are mutually constitutive with their identities in physical life.

On the one hand, they tend to perform a deeply normalised identity by sharing ‘lightweight’ content (Ito & Okabe, 2005) on WeChat. Since their audience on WeChat mostly consists of the people they know in physical life, this performance and the recognition they get from their audience can help them maintain their relationships with their pre-existing social networks while reinforcing their identities in this network. On the other hand, they are inclined to perform a values-based identity on Weibo. Because performing these values to their pre-existing social networks either in physical spaces or on WeChat may disrupt their relationships with people from these networks who believe in different values, they need a space where they can distance themselves from their pre-existing social networks to safely perform their values and to gain recognition. Weibo hence becomes a natural choice because participants’ followers on Weibo are mostly strangers who share certain values or interests with them. Weibo enables them to distance themselves from their pre-existing social networks and to perform their values-based identity to the audience of strangers who follow them based on certain shared interests and values.

*Cunzaigan* (存在感, sense of existence) on WeChat

Most of the study participants actively share life moments or links to online content that they find entertaining, informative or of practical use in ‘Moments’ on WeChat. When asked about their reasons for doing this, Shenqi said that:
It is mainly for experiencing *Cunzaigan* (a sense of existence), since my university classmates are now located in different places, sharing this stuff can maintain the temperature of our relationship. Also, these days, people are all busy with work, we do not have much time to catch up with friends after work, doing this can at least tell them I am still alive and also let me know that they are alive as well.

存在感是第一的，因为我大学的同学现在都在不同地方，发这些东西以维持一下我们关系的热度。而且，现在工作的话，因为平时工作也很忙，也没有太多时间跟朋友进行社交，发朋友圈就是说，基本上让人家知道，自己还活着吧，然后你也知道别人也活着吧。

Later in the interview, Shenqi added:

This city seems very crowded, but most people do not exist to you because you have no connection with them… you can only confirm your existence through interacting with other people. When you are at work, everybody is busy, after work, you basically just go home and sleep, you do not even see your families very often, therefore, WeChat is a convenient way to prove to yourself that you still exist. For me, this is the most important function of WeChat.

这个城市看着好像很多人的样子，但是大多数人对你而言并不存在，因为你跟他们没有交集，……，你只有通过跟其他人的互动才能确认你自己的存在。上班的时候大家都很忙，下班基本上，回到家你只是睡觉，跟家里人见面的机会也比较少，那就是说微信能够提供一个比较快捷方便，证明你还存在的一个渠道吧。我觉得它对我而言最重要是这个功能。
The word *Cunzaigan* was also used by other participants to account for their sharing on WeChat. Xiakuan is a 26 year old investment consultant at a bank in Shenzhen. He had just earned his bachelor’s degree through part-time study before the interview was conducted. He lives with his girlfriend in Shenzhen. His hometown is in Yangjiang, but his parents are now both living in Shunde\(^41\). He usually spends a few hours on the internet after work, mostly watching news and browsing Weibo and WeChat. He also follows online forums about cars and guitars, his personal hobbies. When talking about different content he posts on Weibo and WeChat, he said that:

On WeChat, all the stuff I post are funny things, Weibo is where I post my view about things, values related stuff, the things I share on WeChat is all about everyday life status, daily ramblings, nothing nutritious, just to letting others know that I still exist, that is it.

微信里都是发一些有趣的东西, 微博是我自己对事物的看法, 价值观相关的东西, 微信就是日常的生活状态, 啰啰嗦嗦, 没什么营养的东西, 就让大家知道我还在, 这样。

Zeqin said he uploaded a photo of his new haircut on WeChat, and asked his friends to comment. For him, he said, it did not matter how his friends commented or even if they teased him, it is the interaction *per se* that mattered. The importance of presence and interaction on WeChat is illustrated by users’ efforts in protecting and maintaining this connection. They tend to share

\(^{41}\) Shunde is a district in the city of Foshan, 108 kilometres away from Shenzhen. It used to be a traditional agricultural county. It has developed into a modern industrial boom town known after 1978 for its manufacturing of furniture and electric appliances.
humorous or pleasant content, which is innocuous, for scrutiny by people from different social contexts with which they may engage in physical life. They are less likely to express strong opinions or values in order to avoid possible conflict with friends holding different political or ideological opinions. A few of them mentioned that they will block some of their contacts on WeChat before sharing certain content that may induce unpleasant feelings among these contacts.

The individualisation of Chinese society after the economic reforms disembedded young people from former social categories (Yan, 2009). The lives of young people who live in Chinese urban areas these days are characterised by a fast pace and an increasing degree of social fragmentation. Ultimately, this leads to a craving for the experience of collective. Online platforms at this point can provide an easily accessible way to experience a sense of immediate connection to people they know in their physical life. As WeChat aggregates all physical life contacts, their selective divulging of personal information on WeChat works as a ‘proof of presence’ for them (Laurent & Bouzefrane, 2015, p. 15) in their social network in physical life. Their interactions with contacts on WeChat, triggered by this shared content, not only reinforce their identities in physical life through mutual recognition but also enable them to experience a sense of belonging in their social network in physical life.

**Sanguan (三观, three views) on Weibo**

In strong contrast to their identity performances on WeChat, used mainly to supplement and maintain their identities in physical life and to confirm their existence, participants are much more outspoken in performing their political and ideological views on Weibo. As for the motivators behind this performance, apart from the sense of privacy they experience with Weibo, forming and maintaining the right *Sanguan* is the most frequently nominated one. The
word Sanguan is a widely used word on the Chinese internet. It literally means ‘three views’ which includes rensheng guan (view of life), shijie guan (world view), and jiazhi guan (view of value). Although participants said in interviews that it is impossible to articulate their Sanguan, we can still get a general idea of what is the right Sanguan for them through their Weibo page and from the contextual information in their Weibo entries.

Shenqi wrote in his Weibo that ‘We want democracy and freedom of speech, whoever does not, we’ll take him down’ (我们要民主言论自由，谁不要的干掉谁). Zeqin who posted ‘liberalism plus independent personality’ (自由主义+独立人格) on his Weibo homepage explained in the interview that it is his personal goal. Apart from these explicit declarations, participants also express opinions and perform the values they hold through commenting on or re-posting other people’s Weibo posts about a wide range of social and political issues. Shenqi forwarded the post below on his Weibo page to express his support for gender equality:

Housewife is a formal profession, the direct economic value they create can easily exceed half of the family income; while the indirect social value created by them is immeasurable…promoting women’s rights, is not to doubt the value of the existence of this profession, but to respect the choice of each woman, give credit to their devotion and contribution.

家庭主妇是一种正规的职业，她们创造的直接经济价值完全能相当于家庭收入的一半；而她们创造的间接的社会价值更无法估量…伸张女权，不是去质疑这种职业的存在价值，而是尊重每个女性的人生选择，肯定她们的付出与贡献。
For Luoni, the issue is about educational inequality. Luoni is a 28 year old medical student who has just finished her master study in Beijing. She studied for her bachelor degree in her hometown Tianjin\textsuperscript{42}. Her parents are both doctors. She studied public health and constantly posted new knowledge she gained from her study, knowledge that updated or even subverted her existing views of certain public health issues. A large number of her Weibo posts started with the opening “Did not know that …” (才知道…), or “teacher said that …” (老师说…). She said it was a way to record what she has learnt from her classes and her own research. She wants to share these records with her classmates so they can check if she has understood this knowledge correctly.

One of her posts forwarded an article outlining the policy that allows candidates from ethnic minority backgrounds to be given extra marks in national college entrance examinations. In another Weibo post, she explained how extra marks are given to students of the Hui nationality in Shanxi Province (陕西省). She also posted data about the distribution of enrolments in the Peking Union Medical College in China. The post says that “The Peking Union Medical College enrols 60 students from Beijing, 90 from another 13 provinces, and do not enrol any students from the rest of the provinces” (协和对北京招生 60，对 13 个省共招生 90，其他省市不招生). She also frequently posts information about the HIV virus to correct common misunderstandings of HIV issues, while also endorsing equal working rights for those affected by the virus.

Zhangguai, an entrepreneur in Beijing, supported equal rights of ethnic minorities by criticising a news report about a university graduation ceremony in which all the students were required to wear traditional Han Chinese clothes. Posts supporting equal rights for women and LGBT groups were forwarded with the comment, ‘create a free and equal world’ (创造一个自由和

\textsuperscript{42} A major port city located in northeastern China, about 130 kilometres from Beijing.
Participants also strongly advocated for individual rights and freedoms for all. They believe that everyone has a right to express themselves, and show considerable tolerance of others’ opinions by contemplating issues from those people’s perspectives. Huaxia, a recent graduate, forwarded a short Japanese video entitled ‘Life is not a Marathon’ to endorse a pluralist view of success which acknowledges personal characteristics, interests, and choices - as opposed to some normalised criteria for success, such as money or social status.

Although most participants expressed no interest in participating in traditional party politics, they did reveal pro-democratic views in online posts. Zhangguai once posted on Weibo a photo he took in Japan. The picture shows a politician standing in heavy snow to promote his political program. Below is his account in this post:

…I know all the politicians in the world are making a show, but even for a show, I think that the Japanese politician was doing it with great sincerity, because that day it was really windy and snowy, at least, to me, his show is more convincing and makes me more comfortable than those I see in Chinese media. Our politicians still need others to hold an umbrella for them when they go out for an inspection. Even for a show, the means they use to express it is better than us, at least they are making a serious effort to canvass votes, in China, I have hardly seen a ballot ticket.

……我也知道世界上所有的政治家都在作秀，但即使是作秀，我觉得那个日本政客也做得很有诚意，因为那天真的是风雪交加，至少，对我而言，他做的秀比我们在（国内）媒体上看到的那种作秀要多少舒服点儿，咱们这儿可能领导下去视察，秘书还得跟在后面打伞呢。即使是作秀，人家的表达方式可能比咱们的这种要稍微高级点儿。起码人家在正儿八经拉选票呢，对吧，国内这个我还真没见过选票。
In a general sense, the values participants perform on Weibo mainly encompass social equality and justice, individual rights and freedom, democracy, and care for marginalised and underprivileged groups. They reveal a strong concern for political and human rights for individuals and in society at large. Their performance of values illustrates their efforts in establishing and maintaining their own moral compass as they navigate their way through the intersections of multiple moral and political values in an increasingly fragmented Chinese society. By connecting with others who share similar values, they change the “moral me” to the “moral we” (Wang, 2013, p. 31) and get the recognition they need to sustain their values-based identity. These value performances reveal their assessment of “what it means to be a proper person in today’s China and how to live up to it” (Yan, 2011, p. 40).

When asked why they choose Weibo to share these opinions and values-related content, Shenqi said he does not share opinion-related content on WeChat because he “does not want to hurt some people he knows”. As for the purpose of posting this content, one of the widely shared motivations is to connect with other Weibo users who share similar opinions and values with them. Panpan, a teacher in Beijing, explained the main reason she prefers to use Weibo:

I like Weibo more because I can find more like-minded people on it…because it is an open platform, other people can see what I posted or forwarded, if people found they share interests or values with me, we can start a discussion of our interested topic right away, it is much more efficient than finding such people in real life, moreover, you can tell if a person’s values are compatible with yours by simply checking the people he/she follows on Weibo. So, in one sentence, Weibo can find like-minded people for you.
我更喜欢微博因为我觉得我可以找到更多跟我志同道合的人，……因为它是一个开放的平台，我在上边说的和转发的别人都可以看到，如果有人发现他们也有类似的兴趣和价值观，我们可以直接在网上谈论我们感兴趣的话题，这比在现实生活里找这样的人高效多了，而且，通过看一个人关注了什么人，你就可以判断这个人的三观跟你合不合。一句话，它能找到跟你志同道合的人。

This view is shared by Lulu, who is a 28 year old nutritionist at a hospital in Beijing. He finished his master’s study in Beijing in 2013, and has been doing his current job for 2 years. He shares a rented apartment with another friend near his hospital, only visiting his family who live in Hernan Province (central China) once a year, during the spring festival. He normally accesses the internet after work using his smartphone. Browsing and sharing on WeChat and Weibo and reading online fiction are his main online activities. In the interview, he said that:

Most of my followers on Weibo are strangers, so I do not need to consider much. But on WeChat, you need to be careful because your bosses are also in your WeChat friends circle, right? You need to consider more before you share, you do not want some of your posts seen by your bosses. But it is not a problem on Weibo, you can express more at will on Weibo.

微博上大多数的人你都不认识，所以不用顾虑那么多。但是在微信上，你就得小心，因为领导也在你的朋友圈里，对吧？你分享的时候要考虑的就多一点，有些东西被领导看到，这个不太好。但微博的话就无所谓了。

In another interview, Shenying stated that:
I think its (Weibo’s) function is probably to know a person that you will not meet in your physical life, if you post something another unknown person thinks is interesting, or vice versa, you may think well this is interesting, and probably you can connect and have a chat with him/her. …it is not with people in your real life, and is mainly something you reached out to an unknown world, it provides another kind of possibility for social contact or making friends.

我觉得它的功能可能还是认识那些生活中不会见到的人吧，如果你发的东西正好是有一个，就是，跟你素未谋面的人，觉得有意思，或者你觉得他发的东西有意思，差不多你就会觉得，哎，还蛮有意思的，可以，就是大家勾搭一下啊。……这不是跟现实生活中的人嘛，主要还是跟那个未知的世界伸出一个小小的这个，什么也好啦，就是有另外一种的社交或者交友的可能性。

By performing these values, they find and connect with other users who share these values, and form a community based on mutual recognition. The values with which they identify become the basis for construction of their values-based identities (Gerbaudo, 2014). Faced with competing moral and political values (such as socialist political values endorsed by the authorities and traditional cultural values), performing the values with which they tend to identify on Weibo in their physical life may disrupt their relationships in the different social contexts of their daily physical lives. In this sense, Weibo provides a relatively free and safe space for them to perform their political and ideological values and connect with those who can identify with them. The Weibo communities being based on the performance and mutual recognition of values means participants can distance themselves from the restrictions posed by their pre-existing social networks on the performance of such identities, and enables them to experience a sense of belonging in these communities.
The significance of this performance was demonstrated in Wang’s (2013) study of Chinese young people and social media. She argued that Chinese young people connect with strangers on social media to develop supportive social networks in which they can pursue freer exploration of self than they were able to in front of people they know in their physical life. This social network with strangers provides a safe space to explore and try out ideas about themselves beyond primary institutions such as family, school, and state which have shaped their lives (ibid.). Their engagement with strangers on Weibo is a way to “distance themselves from people they know”, and “an important form of sociality for identity making” (ibid., p. 27).

**Navigating China’s complex society**

The social contexts participants access on Weibo and WeChat echo the two competing norms of community in China identified by Wang (2013). One of them relies on the existing notion of *guanxi* ties that are based in pre-existing social circles at home, school and work. Participants’ identity performances on WeChat are primarily for maintaining their identity in communities of this norm, while the other relies on individuals’ notions of community that are framed by the social networks with which they choose to affiliate. The performances on Weibo are mainly pursued by participants to form their identities in communities formed by this norm.

These two different mechanisms of online identity performance are found in other studies. boyd (2014) argues in her study of young Americans’ online activities that, unlike people from her generation who use the internet as a mechanism to escape from local community and connect to a potentially bigger world, American teenagers these days go online mainly to connect and hang out with people in their communities whom they already know. While in Wong’s (2013) study Chinese young people’s usage of the internet is quite the opposite. They mainly used the internet to connect and engage with strangers, enabling freer explorations of self than were possible in front of people they knew. Their connection with strangers online affords a new
sociality by which supportive networks can be forged for the formation of identities beyond family, school and the state, the three major institutions that oversee their lives.

The online identity performances pursued by participants in this study illustrate an interlaced co-existence of two lines of online identity performance. On WeChat, they connect and maintain their relationships with people they know in their physical life, performing a normalised identity which is highly homogeneous with identities they perform in physical life. While on Weibo, they actively explore and perform values-based identities with strangers as a way to experiment with different identities and to seek recognition of and support for these identities. The internet is used by them not as an escape from their offline lives and identities, but as a channel through which to engage with different people and social networks. Their performances of different identities accord with Rainie and Wellman’s (2012) idea of the “networked self”, which refers to “a single self that gets reconfigured in different situations as people reach out, connect, and emphasize different aspects of self” (2012, 126).

Although Wong’s (2013) study did not pay equal attention to young Chinese internet users’ online identity performances to the people they already know in physical life, I share her view about young Chinese people’s identity work being a strategic approach to positioning the self they want to become in current Chinese society. The different lines of identity performance in communities with two different norms reflect their efforts to “navigate the everyday paradoxes of growing up in Chinese society” (Wang, 2013, p. 57), not simply “to disconnect from or rebel against it” (ibid., p. 20).

Although the two strategies participants use to navigate their online identity performance are indicated quite clearly in the data, the two platforms are often used in conjunction (DeLuca et al., 2016). The different performances of identity on Weibo and WeChat are by no means
applicable to every individual user. The line between the private and the public is always fluid. It has not been completely negated by the seemingly borderless communication on the internet; it was merely redrawn by users’ agential appropriation of the affordances of social media for communication and networking. As for the second strategy, a large number of WeChat users do not have a Weibo account; some users who have both Weibo and WeChat ID simply synchronize the content they post on the two platforms. As Biesta et al. (2009) argue, identity practice is not merely shaped by contexts and relationships; the disposition of individuals plays a decisive role. The affordances of social media can only have meaning when users effectively employ them to fulfil their needs for identity formation.

Conclusion
Participants’ identity performances occur across two dimensions. The first dimension is their performance of identity as a member of the Weibo community. Through aligning their participatory activities on Weibo with the dominant norms, discourses and language practices in this community, they form their identity as an online citizen in the Weibo community. The second dimension is their strategic performances of identities in relation to different social networks to which they have access on WeChat and Weibo.

Their strategy of performing different identities on different social media platforms is informed by their assessment of the private and public domains that they experience on these two platforms, and by their need to perform their identity as supplementary to or distant from their physical life. In order to achieve consistency in their identities in pre-existing social networks on WeChat, they perform a deeply normalised self in this space by constantly referencing or ‘citing’ the dominant social norms and discourses in their offline social contexts (Butler, 1993). Thanks to their pre-existing relationships with their audience, their performance on WeChat can easily initiate interactions with this audience through which they reinforce their identity in
physical life and experience a sense of belonging based on the emotional attachments embodied in their *Cunzaigan* (sense of existence).

While on Weibo, due to the anonymity of their identity performance and the fact that the majority of their followers are unknown to them in physical life, participants are afforded a safer, more private space than is available in physical life to perform their *Sanguan* (three values) with which they identify. Based on this performance, they can find and connect with ‘like-minded people’ and form loosely connected communities on the basis of shared values embodied in their performances, mutually recognising their performances to form their values-based identities and experience a sense of belonging. In this sense, Weibo provide a space for participants’ mutual recognition and shared understanding of the complex social context in which they live.

These findings show that the internet, as a new space for identity performance and recognition, can function not only as an echo chamber which reproduces and amplifies the power of dominant social discourses in shaping people’s identity (normalized public performance on WeChat for audiences they know from physical life), but also as a relatively free space for people’s experimentation and formation of alternative identities which may reconstruct existing social discourses and organize new ideas and practices of society (performance of values for virtual communities). How this space is employed is determined by the sense of belonging people can experience in different online communities. This sense of belonging is co-constructed by the norms and discourses in physical and virtual society, by the possibilities afforded by different social media platforms for identity work, and by users’ agential use of these possibilities for identity performance.

Taking both identity and belonging as everyday concerns that involve performance and recognition of that performance in the poststructuralist tradition (Butler, 1999; Cuervo & Wyn, 2017), this chapter underlines how Chinese young people in urban areas form their identities
and experience senses of belonging through self-conscious and deliberate performances across social media spaces. It demonstrates that in a networked era, when young people are connected to the internet at any given time, the binary between online and offline is no longer helpful. A more valid question to ask should be ‘how context, audience, and identity intersect’ in young people’s lives (boyd, 2014, p. 30). This question contributes to a better understanding of how young people perform identity and experience senses of belonging in relation to complicated social relationships.
Chapter 7 Online Citizenship Practices for Social Change

Introduction

In this chapter I focus on young adults’ orientations and strategies when engaging in online activities. I examine the participants’ discussions and posts that aim to contribute to social change. Through an analysis of these discussions and posts, I identify three types of orientations reflected in their online practices. These orientations are identified as: angry youth, powerless cynics and realistic idealists. While these orientations differ from each other, they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the generation of participants’ online activities is a flexible and contingent process in which different orientations interact with specific social conditions, rather than a predictable and linear/developmental process.

The chapter continues with a discussion of the two key strategies employed by participants in using online activities for social change: bricolage, and using self-interest to account for their efforts to create social change. These strategies demonstrate how young people tactically engage with social structures and power relations to effect social change. They also illustrate that politics is no longer limited to confrontational practices; it is also about social change initiatives embedded in people’s everyday activities.

Taken together, the orientations and strategies of young Chinese people show how individuals make sense of the material and social conditions of citizenship in China through online engagement with power relations. The internet as a medium extends the realm of participants’ social engagement and affords an accessible venue for young people’s social participation. It facilitates their negotiation and formation of subjectivity, which is an essential element of citizenship that informs the (changing) understanding of their positions in and relationships with society (Lehmann, 2004).
Three types of orientation

In this section, I discuss the three orientations manifested in participants’ online activities for social change, namely, angry youth; powerless cynics; and realistic idealists. They represent participants’ subjective responses to the structural and social realities in which they are immersed. They are interrelated, function concurrently, and vary in salience in generating participants’ online participatory activities in specific times and contexts.

Angry youth

The first type of orientation identified from participants’ online activities is fenqing (愤青, literally means angry youth). The word “愤青” is usually translated to mean “angry/extreme nationalist” in the literature of Chinese internet studies, referring to the young enthusiastic patriots who tend to support China and the Chinese government as a whole, unconditionally. They can be easily enraged by critics, or even by apparently reasonable reflections on China and the Chinese government, and attack these critics aggressively in defence of China. The word is used by the participants in this study in a loose and expansive way to describe their status as opinionated people, driven by partial knowledge of certain social issues, who can be easily enraged by different opinions and are willing to defend their opinions aggressively; therefore, I describe them here as “angry youth”.

This type of orientation is represented on Weibo as active expression of strong opinion about, or as criticism of political and social issues in harsh or even extreme language. Zhuotu is a 26 year old editor at a government website in Guangzhou. Being a regular 9-to-5er, her work is not particular busy. She lives with her partner in a rented apartment in Guangzhou, a metropolitan city 225 kilometres away from her hometown Yangjiang.43 She said jokingly in

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43 A prefecture-level city in the southeast of Guangdong province.
the interview that she cannot live without the internet. It is why she cannot stay in her hometown with her parents for more than a week - because there is no Wi-Fi. She uses the internet mainly for work, news, and learning how to cook and bake. She often shares pictures of her baking products on the Moment on WeChat.

Zhuotu once re-posted a news report by The Beijing News which stated “After Typhoon Rammasun, hundreds of thousands of affected people in the provinces of Hainan, Guangdong and Guangxi are suffering from water and electricity breakdown, waiting for emergency assistance in 35-degree high temperatures, 2000 quilts allocated by the Red Cross have already been sent to the affected area”. (超强台风“威马逊”过境之后，琼粤桂三省区数十万受灾群众在35°高温炎热、水电中断的情况下等待应急救助，红十字会总会调拨2000床棉被运往台风灾区). She asked, “Where did their brain go?” (脑子去哪儿了) as she re-posted the news to express her anger at the seemingly irrelevant material the Red Cross had allocated to assist the affected area.

Lulu, who is a nutritionist at a hospital in Beijing, commented, “This is simply bullshit” (简直扯淡) when he reposted a news report by the official Weibo account of Yangcheng Evening News to his own page. The news report says that an old lady fell over when a car pulled over three metres away from her, and the traffic police affirmed that the driver was guilty of intimidating the old lady (老太在三米外摔倒，交警认定司机吓倒老太需担责).

In another case, Xiakuan was irritated by a post made by the official account of the People’s Daily on Weibo. In this post, banks in China were criticised for being inefficient in customer service and for lack of social responsibility; the article attributed these phenomena to inadequate competition and weak regulation of the financial industry. Xiakuan expressed his
anger by forwarding this post to his page and interrogating the People’s Daily by asking “People’s Daily, are you objective?” (人民日报，你客观吗?) As an employee of the banking and financial sector himself, Xiakuan has worked in different positions at the bank. He said that the reason he was angry with the post by the People’s Daily and interrogated it on Weibo was that he knows how hard bank staff work to optimise their service and improve their efficiency. In Xiakuan’s view, the main reason banks are inefficient is exactly because there are too many regulations from the authorities; thus, to solely blame banks for these shortcomings is unfair.

Anger towards what was understood as significant levels of corruption in Chinese society was also evident in other participants’ posts; for example, Xiaomeng vented his anger about a case of corruption exposed by a Weibo post. The post disclosed that a principal of a secondary school in Hainan Province took kickbacks from contractors of school construction projects, suppliers of school facilities and books, and manufacturers of student uniforms. While he reposted this news to his own Weibo page, he expressed his anger towards the rampant corruption in schools by commenting, “Isn’t this commonplace?”

This type of participation is the common response of participants to events associated with social and political issues, such as corruption, misbehaviour of government institutions, environment pollution, and other issues that they are passionate about or that are closely related to their everyday lives. Participants’ discussion of their experiences and their expressions of anger are enabled to a large extent by Weibo. On the one hand, Weibo, as an alternative source of information and opinion to the official mass media, presents a version of Chinese society that is not pre-censored. By using Weibo, participants are exposed to more social and political

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44 The People's Daily is an official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, and also the biggest newspaper group in China. It provides direct information on the policies and viewpoints of the government, and its content is deemed to be authoritative statements of official government policy.

45 An island province located at China’s southernmost point.
problems - about which they may feel angry - than they were before accessing Weibo. In this sense, through Weibo, participants feel their way into worlds they cannot directly experience (Papacharissi, 2016). On the other hand, participants are empowered by Weibo because it at least provides an accessible outlet for them to express their anger, anticipation and hope.

The posts and comments through which these responses are manifest represent a form of affective expression which is instant, emotive and phatic (Papacharissi, 2016). They blend experience, emotion, opinion and fact, reflecting deeply subjective accounts and interpretations of events. They focus more on communicating personal news or emotions than on news updates. They do not necessarily deepen people’s understanding of a social problem therefore, as rational discussions in a traditional public sphere might do. For this reason, affective engagement (manifested as expressions of anger in this case) is very much neglected by studies of public participation dominated by “conventional deliberative logic of a traditional public sphere” (Papacharissi, 2015). This affective form of participation was experienced by study participants as less mature and meaningful in terms of contributing to public discussion.

Xiaoyu talked about her experience of being a fenqing:

If goes back to the posts I made during my postgraduate study, I do not even want to see them myself, because those posts were too aggressive. …, I was affected by those extreme opinions and emotions, and tended to criticise some people and issues using acerbic and harsh language. But in retrospect, I still think that stage is meaningful, because, after that drastic time, I started to notice the existence of different opinions, and tried to avoid being too subjective or partial when analysing things, so that stage has its value.
Similarly, Xianyu also commented on his time of being a fenqing:

When I started to use Weibo, I normally post my views about news, but I stopped doing so recently, because before I was like a fengqing, when it was the second year of my high school, I wrote a lot of comments on Weibo, I was reading Han Han at that time, so, I might have performed more like a fenqing.

刚开始用微博的时候，我就会写一下对新闻的看法，但最近就不会写了，就是，很早的时候就感觉有一些愤青吧，就大概在高二的时候，写的很多，那时候就是，那时候有在看韩寒，所以怎么说，可能表现的比较愤青一点。

Although the orientation of angry youth is cast as a somewhat immature stage in these two quotes, it does not mean it is simply a stage to “get over” in a developmental sense. It has

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A Chinese professional rally driver, best-selling author, and China’s most popular blogger. He was known (especially among Chinese youth) for his blog articles which poignantly criticised the Chinese government and social problems. He was interviewed by CNN in 2010 as China’s rebel writer who has become the unofficial voice of his generation (the generation born in the 1980s).
continuous presence in shaping participants’ online activities. Zhuotu talked about her comment on the news regarding the Red Cross in the interview:

I simply thought that it was summer, so quilts are not needed in the disaster area, I was in an unstable mood at that time, so I wrote this. I rarely use harsh language like that… now when I thought about it again, actually after a disastrous typhoon, quilt is necessary. Now I start to wonder whether my comment was too rash.

就因为那时候是夏天嘛，就觉得那个时候灾区是不需要棉被的，而且那个时候是处于情绪不稳定期，所以才会这么写吧，感觉我很少会用这么激烈的语言…其实现在细想一下，其实台风之后，棉被其实也是需要的呀。现在会觉得会去想那时是不是太鲁莽。

This quote shows that the reason for the harsh commentary offered by Zhuotu is not that she is incapable of analysing social events rationally, but because of the strong emotions she felt at the moment she read the news. The orientation of angry youth came to the fore when the harsh comment was made.

Although affective participation is considered by participants to be less meaningful, the significance of participants’ affective participation generated from their orientation as angry youth should not be overlooked simply because of its limited contribution to rational deliberation in a traditional public sphere. It is valuable in at least two ways. First, the mixed expressions of emotion, opinion and fact generated by affective participation increase awareness of an issue, and amplify the intensity of that awareness, enabling people to feel an urgency to act upon those feelings (Tomkins, 1995). Affective participation increases
affective input into news events, supporting them to develop into compelling and engaging stories which resonate with internet users. It nurtures and sustains involvement, connection, and cohesion, creates affective publics characterised by “an ambience, an always on presence, that sustains an online home for a movement” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 316). In this study, the orientation of angry youth sustains the affective publics on Weibo with their “always on” presence and readiness to react to social events, while raising public awareness of social issues by putting hot topics on the public discussion agenda.

Secondly, affective participation can be a bridge between politics and people’s personal lives. Robinson (2009) argues that affective participation is a way for citizens to find their own places in a news story. The performative and evocative expressions of affective participation blend public with private, and make politics into something personally felt (Papacharissi, 2015). This way, individuals can experience their affiliation to affective publics, defined by Papacharissi (2015) as “networked publics”. These publics are mobilized and connected (or disconnected) through expressions of sentiment” (p. 320) which manifested in this study as discursive expressions of anger on Weibo. This affiliation or sense of belonging can also give birth to new identities upon which affective citizenship is based (Di Gregorio & Merolli, 2016). This type of orientation is, in this sense, a form of intersubjectivity formed through participants’ mediated engagement with Chinese society and other subjects in the affective publics.

**Powerless cynics**

Another type of orientation manifested in participants’ online engagement is that of powerless cynics. This type of participation is apparent in participants’ less active expression of their political opinions and values (though they still browse Weibo frequently to keep updated with news and learn people’s opinions about social and political issues), and the evidence of
cynicism in their Weibo posts. Xiaomeng once re-posted a news report on Weibo entitled “The political bureau of the CPC central committee meeting decided 42,000 billion Yuan investment to the development of the pan Beijing region in next six years”, and commented, “They do have a lot of money”. When he was asked why he made this comment, he said:

This is a huge amount of money, the number is unimaginable for an individual to earn for his whole life, but it’s just a matter of issuing a document for our government, and we know little about how this money will be used, what change it will make…, I made this comment to express my critical view on this issue.

In another case, Xiaomeng re-posted a news report about the establishment of a leadership group for football reform in China, putting “Hehe” (呵呵) as a comment at the top. The word “Hehe”, which mimics the sound of laughter, is a hot online meme. It was used by the participant as a response to the news which he thought was ridiculous but not worth spending time arguing about. He used this meme here to express his critical view towards the establishment of such a leadership group, using sarcasm. It implies that he could not care less about Chinese football when so many pressing social problems need to be solved, and reflects his sense of powerlessness in making the government address real social problems rather than those cared about by the leaders\textsuperscript{47}.

\textsuperscript{47} It is well-known in China that the current president Xi Jinping likes football. He has expressed his high expectations for the Chinese national football team on many public occasions.
This powerless cynic orientation partly results from participants’ awareness of the limitations of the power of social media in generating the social change they want. Shihou related an embarrassing story about his participation in an event, the 2013 Southern Weekly incident:\footnote{An incident involving the staff of the Southern Weekly who protested the interference and censorship of the Guangdong Propaganda Department in the first issue of the newspaper in 2013, above and beyond the normal processes, which caused several commonsense mistakes in the published newspaper. The incident received widespread attention from global media and Chinese social media, the focus of which was protest about media censorship in Mainland China and asking for news freedom.}

When this incident happened, I said on my Weibo page that if the minister of Guangdong Propaganda Department does not stand up and apologise, I will never use my Weibo account to say anything. And it turned out that the minister did not apologise, and I started to post things to my Weibo page after stopping using it for a while (laugh).

The feeling of powerlessness in changing society through online engagement was felt by other participants. Xiakuan said that all he can do is just follow the news online to get updated information about political and economic issues in China. He described these issues as like “things about fighting between gods” (神仙打架的事情) because he cannot play any role in the decision-making process (我只能是关注一下，这样而已). Lingzi said that people have a right to express themselves online, but it does not mean that what they said will change anything (他们有说话的权利，但是这个说话的权利，是他们能说，但是不代表他们说了….)
有用). All policies are made by the government without consultation; your protests do not seem to be able to change anything, said her. Shenyin also said that the influence she wants to have is not such powerless online influence; internet users express themselves and discuss issues online intensely, but it does not seem to be able to change anything (我说的影响力，不是说我们现在一个劲的在这里说，但是实际上却改变不了任何东西). Xianyu expressed his anger on Weibo after his post sharing photographic skills was censored by mistake. He said that he just needed to express his feelings because “you do not have any space to appeal, and cannot do anything about it” (你无处申诉，也无能为力). Zixun described his participation in public discussions on Weibo as “peripheral participation” (边缘参与), indicating his perception of the trivial or even negligible power his online participation can have in influencing social and political issues.

This feeling of powerlessness resonates with Zhao’s (2008) observations about internet events in China in which she argues that it takes significant amounts of internet users’ collective effort to put a social issue on the public agenda. Moreover, there are several structural limitations and contingencies in the way, limiting the capacity of online public opinion to generate institutional change. On the other hand, expressions of powerlessness can also be understood as de-politicized or infra-political expression (Scott, 1990; Yang et al., 2014), through which the weaker side expresses its dissatisfaction in an unobtrusive way and constructs its collective identity.

Apart from participants’ feeling of powerlessness in effecting change in Chinese society via online participation, the orientation of powerless cynics is also shaped by participants’ understanding of their society and the power of the social structures that they experience through their engagement with online and offline communities. Duanyi’s work as a public relations manager is intense, often entailing overtime work. She wrote on her Weibo page:
“Thought I could bring a bit of difference to the world”. When I asked why she posted this, she said:

Because before, I thought that I would do something special and interesting. I can show people different possibilities in life and can bring happiness to people around me, but it turned out that I am just another ordinary person who is doing an ordinary job, and too busy to think about my life. So I wrote this to express my helpless feeling with my current status, a status that I am not happy with, and not reconciled with, but it seems I cannot do anything about it.

Because以前,我会想着自己将来会做点什么特别或有趣的事儿。可以让别人看到，哦，生活可以这样选择，可以给身边的人带来快乐，但后来发现我只是另外一个做着一份普通工作的普通人，而且忙得都不能去想自己的生活了。所以我觉得写这个就是对自己这种平凡生活的一种无力感吧，（笑），就是一种不满意、不甘心，但又反抗不了的态度。

This powerless feeling was also clearly described by Zhuotu:

I recently worked at a government institution for a while, and feel that things like equality and freedom are like fuyun⁴⁹. I call it fuyun not because I think it is impossible or not achievable, but because I just do not know what I can do to realise it, it is too big an ideal

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⁴⁹ Fuyun, literally meaning floating cloud, is a popular expression in the internet lexicon in China, usually used to describe things people chase which are actually meaningless or unreachable, see footnote 19 on page 125.
for a small individual like me, and it seems I can hardly have any impact on its realisation, or maybe I cannot live to the day of its realisation.

最近在机关里面呆了一下, 就觉得什么自由平等什么的, 都觉得是浮云。浮云不是说不可能实现, 而是说我不知道为了它的实现, 我能做些什么, 这是个很宏大的事情, 我一个小小的人对这个大的理想来说, 好像没有什么影响的作用咯, 或者是即使有一天实现了,说不定我也看不到了。

The orientation of powerless cynics is shaped by the powerlessness participants feel through everyday, individual encounters with social structures. It is also associated with their disillusionment with the lack of power of their internet-mediated social and political participation. This orientation is also identified by Bruter et al. (2016) as one prototypical model of the youth participation crisis. In the cynicism model, young people have a desire to effect political outcomes through engaging with crucial social and political issues, but the channels of participation at their disposal are not effective in responding to their need for representation. The cynicism of young people is a result of the mismatch between their desire for participation and the participatory channels at their disposal, channels which might effectively address the concerns of today’s youth culture which celebrates diverse identities, privileges lifestyle politics, and concerns itself with local and global issues (Loader, 2007).

The orientation of powerless cynics shares features similar to the cynicism model of the youth participation crisis. Participants with this orientation comment less on news and socio-political issues, focus more on exploring different values and opinions, pay more attention to understanding social issues and reflecting on their relationship with society, and express their powerlessness in changing society through cynical posts online. This feeling of powerlessness is intensified by disillusionment about online participation as a new form of participation for
effecting social change; They therefore choose to make cynical comments online as an infra-political action (Scott, 1990) to express their dissatisfaction and construct their collective identity.

**Realistic idealists**

The third type of orientation identified from participants’ online activities is called by study participants *xianshi de lixiang zhuyizhe* (现实的理想主义者, realistic idealist). This orientation generates online activities characterised by a more realistic attitude towards the power of online participation in changing Chinese society. Participants place more emphasis on doing their job well, becoming a better self, and doing whatever is feasible to improve their society. This status was well illustrated in a Weibo post by Shenqi in response to a heated public discussion about air pollution in China, a discussion triggered by the online release of an independent documentary “*Under the Dome*”\(^{50}\). The post says:

> Those who have watched “Under the Dome”, please do not be so agitated, and do not talk too much about your ideal, just sort your garbage more carefully, stop spitting, use a towel instead of tissue when possible, and drive smoothly with less sudden braking or acceleration, that’s it!

> 那些看完那个穹顶什么的，也先别激动，也别一腔理想，乖乖的把自己乱扔的垃圾分类好，不要随地吐痰，能用毛巾别用纸，有事没事别急刹急起步。就酱！

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\(^{50}\) An independent documentary film by Chai Jing, a former journalist at China Central Television, which was an in-depth investigation of China’s air pollution. It was released online in Feb 2015 preceding the meetings of the National People’s Congress and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. The documentary received 300 million views within four days and triggered extensive online discussion about China’s air pollution ("Under the Dome (film)," 2016).
In the interview, he further accounted for the post:

I am not attempting to change the world, because to me it is just a by-product, a thing that does not need to be done on purpose. First of all, you need to change yourself, because only after you changed yourself well, like what I said just now about self-discipline, if you are not happy with the deterioration of the environment, then you should start with sorting your garbage at your home more carefully, do whatever you are capable of. The thing I am trying to do now is to enrich my knowledge and view about the world, then form my own system in engaging with the society and dealing with different things, after this system was established, I may be able to affect other people through my behaviour or views.

This realistic orientation was reflected in other participants. Gasion, a 26 year old programmer, works at China Unicom in Guangzhou. He shares a dormitory provided by the company with another colleague. He said in the interview that “I think it is enough if everyone could do their job well, do not bother to change the world” (我觉得在社会上每个人做好自己本分的工作，就已经很足够了，不要想着去改变世界). Xihe is a 28 year old teacher and entrepreneur in
Beijing. She started an educational company with a few friends after she finished her master’s study in Beijing. Her company provides media education courses to students, and she is one of the teachers at the company. Her hometown is in Zhejiang Province\footnote{Zhejiang is a province in eastern China bordering the East China Sea. It is about 1500 kilometres from Beijing.}. She currently lives alone in a rented apartment in Beijing, mainly using the internet to search for resources for course development and to communicate with friends and family. She also watches online videos and American TV series for entertainment. She identifies herself as a realistic idealist in her Weibo profile, explaining that:

It (realistic idealist) tells me that things need to be done step by step, but I have an idealistic expectation in my mind and feel that things will get better. I am not one of those who just keeps complaining and doing nothing.

它提醒我，就是事情要一步一步做，但是心里会有一个比较、比较理想的预期，就是觉得这件事情总会变好的这样子。就不是那种抱怨、抱怨、抱怨，抱怨这一派的。

The orientation of realistic idealist speaks to a popular image meme (see Figure 7.1) on the Chinese internet which also involves an ideal. The girl in the picture is a typical female student in the primary school textbooks of the post-80s generation, that is, an icon invested with the collective childhood memory of China’s younger generations. The text below the image says, “We still need an ideal, what if it was realized?” This meme went viral among young Chinese people for a reason. The word Mengxiang (梦想, dream/ideal) has a complex meaning in China. In the primary education of the post-80s generation, ideal is the synonym for the communist ideal, for which every student was taught to work or even sacrifice themselves.
Since the late 1970s, this interpretation of ideal has been marginalized as economic development has come to the centre stage of the national agenda, and pursuit of economic profit became the dominant social discourse. An ideal in such a social context seems out of place or irrelevant. After about 30 years of fast economic growth, and after people’s basic needs were met, Chinese society became more diversified. Meanwhile, the negative consequences of economic development, such as pollution and moral deterioration, made people think about their wellbeing in a more comprehensive sense. It is against this backdrop that the word ideal has been revived in recent years among young people. The ideal here can stand for their diverse individual dreams which differ from those conceptions of success that are endorsed by pragmatic, mainstream social discourses. It can also stand for the younger generation’s ideal of a better society.

**Figure 7.1 A popular meme about ideal**

The words “what if” in this meme illustrate its users’ clear awareness of the difficulties in bringing about change in current society by simply having ideals on both personal and social levels, while the word “still” suggests their determination to make change despite the difficult environment. It indicates their intention to reconstruct the discourse of ideal by challenging the univocal political or economic discourse. The meme shows young people’s subjective desire to bring change to their society as realistic idealists; such subjectivity is produced by their negotiation of a position in Chinese society through mediated and direct social engagement.
The “realistic” activities they conduct online fall into several categories. First, they use their individual social media page to endorse the values of social, gender and ethnic equality, personal freedom, and the rule of law, to express their anticipation of a responsive and clean government, and of a society with love and trust.

Concern about a lack of equality in different spheres of life was present in several of participants’ comments. Haoru, who works for a website for backpackers in Shenzhen, is 24 years old and lives with her family in Shenzhen. She uses the internet to keep update with the latest development in the internet industry, and also to collect information about outdoor activities closely related to her work. She remains online when she is awake, and enjoys sharing the pictures of her cat on WeChat after work. She once forwarded a Weibo post that came from a single girl in her 30s. In this post, the girl criticized an arrogant man she met on a blind date who declared that no matter how successful a woman is, she is never complete without marrying someone (不论你多成功，没成家你永远不完整). In re-posting this message, she criticised the discriminatory social discourse about women which was demonstrated in the man’s view about women’s success, while she endorsed the value of gender equality.

Gender equality was not the only injustice participants wanted to address through their online practices and in the interviews for this study. Zhangguai, for instance, expressed his concern about equal rights and respect for ethnic minority groups by criticising a news report about a university graduation ceremony in which all the students were required to wear traditional Han Chinese clothes. In the interview, he showed his concern for this issue by asking the question, “Were the ethnic minority students at this university allowed to wear their traditional clothes?” (这个学校少数民族的学生也可以穿他们的传统服饰吗?)
With the development of e-government in China, Chinese Internet users tend to use social media as a tool to monitor government officials, while at the same time utilising it as a channel to communicate with government institutions. They try to create a more responsive and effective government by posting their concerns and issues and tagging the Weibo accounts of related government institutions. This was the case for Panpan, a 29 years old entrepreneur. After completing her master’s degree at a university in Beijing, Panpan started an educational company providing after-school curricula for adolescents. She lives in Beijing with her family and spends at least ten hours online every day. Panpan likes to share pictures of her life on WeChat, regarding it as an open diary. She expressed her dissatisfaction with the inefficiency of the Industry and Commerce Bureau of Chaoyang District (in Beijing) on Weibo and tagged its official Weibo account. Similar action was taken by Huaxia, who tagged the local transportation bureau at the end of his Weibo post, claiming that a large number of the buses running in his hometown did not have any escape hammer installed. He also tagged the local urban administration bureau to push it to dispose of a pile of construction waste next to his home.

Apart from taking practical, available measures to effect social change, participants are also realistic about the possible effect of these activities. When she was asked if the government institutions responded after being tagged in their Weibo posts, Panpan said only the Industry and Commerce Bureau had responded to her post, telling her that the bureau would reflect on the procedures in their service to improve their efficiency. The poor response rate did not however reduce participants’ enthusiasm for participation in such activity. When asked why he still kept tagging the Weibo accounts of government institutions in his Weibo posts when he knew the response rate was very low, Huaxia said:
…because only if you use your voice, can it be possibly heard by someone, maybe your voice is small, but as long as you spoke it out, it will be heard by someone someday.

…因为发出一点声音，可能就会被一些人听到，可能这个声音比较小，但是只要你说出来，总有人能听到它

In response to the same question, Panpan said:

It (tagging the Weibo account of government institutions) can at least test which ones are just mummies, which ones are seriously maintained by the institution as a channel to communicate with the public.

这样做 (在微博@政府部门的官方微博) 至少可以测试一下哪些官微是僵尸啊、哪些是真有人在运营的、想作为一个跟大众沟通的渠道。

Other participants also believe that posting comments about Chinese citizens’ misbehaviour in public places on Weibo could be a useful mechanism in attempts to correct these behaviours. Zhangguai said that he might have intended to change the situation subconsciously, but he did not think it would produce any significant effect, unless everybody was doing what he did. He still thinks there is a chance to effect change in these behaviours because, he asks, “What if all the internet users could use Weibo and WeChat properly, and try to post meaningful stuff? You can never imagine” (万一呢，是吧，大家都把微信微博用好了，都尽量发点儿有用的东西，这是没法想象的事儿)
The quotes above illustrate the features of the participatory activities of participants with a “realistic idealist” orientation. This orientation is based on participants’ perceptions of social relationships and institutions acquired through their engagement with online and offline communities. They have a more realistic conception of the power of an individual in effecting social change via social media.

This orientation is the result of participants’ sensitive efforts to connect their ideal with the available opportunities in their everyday lives by using the tools at hand. In other words, it is their practical effort to build a bridge between the Chinese society they have and the one they want, using what capacity they have. This orientation is apparent in individual actions on Weibo that endorse political values and push the government to address specific issues in people’s everyday lives. Participants are realistic about the potential of their online participation to actualise their ideal Chinese society, and they tend to work for this ideal realistically, as indicated by their taking advantage of any available opportunity to endorse values they uphold and push for social change in their everyday lives. As Ash (2013) argued in his article, young Chinese people pursue individual political actions in their everyday lives, despite the general impression of young people’s apparent failure to care about politics. Their disaffection from formal and confrontational, collective political movements and their pursuit of individual forms of participation is perfectly explained by a quote from a participant which says, “It’s not that you don’t care (about politics), it’s not that you don’t dare—you’re simply being realistic” (ibid. p. 43).

The focus on the present in the realistic idealist orientation resonates with the prefigurative politics practised by young people in India (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2016). In their study of the everyday political actions of young people in north India, Jeffrey and Dyson (2016) delineate a form of prefigurative politics which is distinctively different from direct confrontational
protests against a dominant regime. This form of politics involves activists’ conscious performance in their present lives of the future they seek to change. Prefiguring the future in the present moment is the dominant feature of this form of politics. Young people who practise this form of politics refuse to wait for the government or other political agencies to make the social change they want, but focus on acting immediately on their own to improve their local communities. They talk less about the future and focus more on creating the quality of life they think current society is lacking. In this politics, the future is no longer a utopian horizon for discussion, but a cumulative outcome precipitated by good actions performed in the present. In this sense, prefigurative politics is “not only a means to an end, but the end itself performed in the present” (ibid., p. 80).

The orientation of realistic idealists in this study shares the spirit of prefigurative politics practised by Indian youth. Online citizenship practices show attempts to bring about social change through prefiguring in their everyday online activities the values they wish to instil in Chinese society and the responsive and effective government they want to have. They focus on performing the change they seek in the present, in their everyday online lives. In other words, what they are trying to do in the online space is to be the change they want to see.

To sum up, participants’ online activities take different forms. They can be comments expressing agitation with social and political problems, cynical expressions of their critical attitudes toward these problems, and expressions of their powerlessness in addressing them. These activities can also be realistic efforts, leveraging every possible opportunity in their everyday lives, to effect the change they want in their society. These forms of participation are underpinned by the collective functioning of all three types of orientation discussed above. These orientations are formed through direct and mediated engagement with social structures. They reflect young Chinese internet users’ perceptions of their relationship with
and location in Chinese society, and their changing understandings of the potential power of internet-mediated social and political participation in bringing about social change.

These orientations are far from fixed, but rather have a fluid and changing nature which reflects participants’ open and contingent constitution of subject. They can be concurrent, varying in salience as initiators of different kinds of participants’ online activities (participation in online discussion of a social event could change from angry expression to rational and realistic deliberation, or the other way around), while powering and shaping participants’ online participation (a cynical comment could also be viewed as an expression of anger, functioning both as a realistic form of protest and as anticipation of social change).

**Strategies for online citizenship practices for social change**

Orientations to online citizenship practices are manifested in different online activities shaped by fluid social contexts and participants’ changing perceptions of their engagement experiences within these contexts. In other words, individuals’ orientations shape and generate online activities in response to the specific Chinese social context. In the performance of this internet-mediated social participation, participants developed various strategies for conducting these activities. In this section I detail two strategies employed by study participants.

**Bricolage**

Levi-Strauss’s (Levi-Strauss, 1974) notion of “bricolage” on its technical plane concerns material manipulations and application. A bricoleur is “someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman” (ibid. p. 16). She works with an already existing set of tools and materials in the context of some present problem with a spirit of “make do with whatever is at hand” (1974:17). This normally involves reorganization or
improvisation with existing elements as an “ad hoc response to the environment” (Hatton, 1989, p. 76). This strategy is evident in young people’s online identity work. Weber and Mitchell (2008) describe young people as bricoleurs who use digital media resources and the cultural items at hand to create their online self-image. Willett (2008) demonstrated young people’s bricolage by showing how they actively appropriate elements of consumer culture to define and perform their identities and to resist the prevalent marketing techniques and discourses of consumer culture. In this section, I use this term to describe the participants’ resourceful use of tools and materials at hand to bring about social change.

This strategy is illustrated in their practice of online citizenship (citizenship in relation to the Weibo community). Participants are very conscious of aligning their online activities to the joint enterprise of the Weibo community which aims to construct an equal and tolerant space, rich in reliable information and diverse opinion (as discussed in chapter five). They are normally cautious with posts and re-posts they make for generating and distributing information and opinions. Their selective and collective forwarding of high quality information effectively casts “votes on who should be heard” (Hermida, 2014), improving the visibility of the best quality information or opinions in the online space. Participants also contribute to rational and effective online discussion when possible. Yanyu once mitigated an online discussion which had turned into an irrational quarrel by commenting, “We are not witnesses, please be rational”. Through this bricolage of online doings, participants “conquer and construct” (Poell & van Dijck, 2016, p. 226) the public space on Weibo together with other users who share the same enterprise.

The strategy of bricolage is also manifest in their engagement with Chinese society, mediated on Weibo. First, users tend to take every possible opportunity to participate in various kinds of civic activities. Almost all the participants have donated money using online payments. They
also shared verified information for collecting donations with their friends on WeChat and on Weibo. Haoru from Shenzhen, who had donated money to left-behind children\textsuperscript{52}, said that “although I cannot donate much, I still want to make my little effort. I feel guilty if I have not done what I am capable of. I want to help no matter how little I can do” (虽然是几十块钱，没有很多，但是就是尽一点点力吧。我看到一些能做的事，我不去做我会很内疚；就算是帮一点点也好). Zixun has a beautiful voice and speaks standard Mandarin. He joined a volunteer group on WeChat to record audio books for blind people. He works with other group members to record the text dispatched to them into audio messages and sends these messages back to the group manager. The manager compiles these audio messages into audio books and provides them to blind people. Xihe has a background in working with print media, together with a strong interest in museums. She works as a volunteer for a free digital magazine which aims to disseminate knowledge and information about museums, exhibitions, and cultural events. In addition to this, she actively posts information about exhibition appreciation and protection of cultural relics on her Weibo page.

Participants also registered with online platforms/websites to participate in civic activities. Luoni subscribed to the WeChat public account of the Youth Volunteer Club at her university from which she received all the information about the volunteer work in which she participated, such as library assistant and sporting event volunteer. Xiakuan did volunteer work as a cleaner at a senior’s home, as a traffic coordinator, and as an information officer at subway stations. These jobs were all dispatched to him through the volunteer website with which he was registered.

Second, participants use Weibo as an avenue for endorsing values such as democracy, rule of law, social equality and equal rights. Luoni and Qinqing (a lecturer at a university in Suzhou)

\textsuperscript{52} Children left behind at their rural homes by their parents who are migrant workers.
all re-posted news about the national policy of giving extra points to students from ethnic minority groups in the national university entrance exam, expressing their opinions about these policies by adding comments. Shenqi endorsed the value of gender equality by expressing his appreciation of housewife as a formal profession with its social and economic contributions.

In another case, Zhangguai posted a photo of an official notice at Changchun International airport which said that the smoking room at all terminals were closed in accordance with an administrative order from the local government. He captioned this photo with a sentence asking: “you have no shame, did you go through any democratic procedure to make such a big decision?!” (臭不要脸的，这么大事儿你们走民主程序了么?!). When I asked him about this post, he said the post was not actually a serious interrogation, because it was not a very big issue for him, and he is not against smoking control. He just wanted to express his dissatisfaction with the authoritarian way in which the government was doing things.

Third, participants use social media resourcefully to defend their rights. Duanyi once posted about her friend’s experience of being cheated by a real estate agent when she tried to rent accommodation, tagging the Weibo account of the manager of the real estate company at which the agent works along with the accounts of a few other famous entrepreneurs in the real estate sector. She said in the interview that she wanted to pressure the company to address this issue. Apart from this, she also wanted to tell other people who read her post the potential risks in renting accommodation from a realtor. Panpan has complained on Weibo about the terrible service she received at a cinema, tagging the official Weibo account of this theatre chain. Duoduo tagged local authorities to plant more trees in the district where her school was located because it is very dusty when it is windy. Although not every post of this kind received a response from the accounts that had been tagged, participants still think this is a useful way to

53 The capital of Jilin Province in the north-east of China.
express their anger or dissatisfaction with government and business institutions, and to try to engender more responsive and effective government.

Lastly, Weibo was also used by participants to deal with other people’s wrongdoings and to try to restore social order. Xiakuan posted a photo of a car parked on a sidewalk, tagging the official Weibo account of Shenzhen traffic police. He said in the interview that he did this because he could not stand this kind of behaviour and wanted the driver to be educated. Zhangguai posted a photo he took in a waiting room at a railway station. In the photo, many passengers sat with their feet up on the opposite seats. The photo was captioned “Da Guomin (大国民, big nationals)”. He said in the interview that he sent this post to express his critical view of these “uncivil behaviours” (不文明行为).

Social media has long been known for what it affords in new ways to communicate and to socially connect. These affordances are creatively leveraged by young Chinese as resources and tools for engaging in various civic and political activities. Participants’ employment of bricolage as a strategy for their online citizenship practice is partly a result of formal channels for social and political participation being still limited or not easily accessed by Chinese young people. More importantly, it is made possible by participants’ efforts to bring about the social change they want to see using whatever they already have at hand and whatever they are able to do in their everyday lives at present.

As a strategy for social change, bricolage has two dominant features: the strong agency to leverage available opportunities and resources for social change, and the strong motivation of internet users to take action in the now. This drive to start to effect change with what is feasible now echoes the approach of participants of the Occupy movement who focused on everyday issues and how they could improvise, using whatever opportunities were available “in the now”
Bricolage as a strategy also speaks to the transformation of political practices among Australian young people. Disengaged from traditional modes of political participation as a result of increasing life responsibilities in an unpredictable society, the political engagement of Australian young people tends to occur in the places and in the relationships that may have an immediate impact on their personal wellbeing, rather than in traditional forums. This reflects young people’s strategy of exerting themselves to achieve an impact and have their say through use of resources over which they have some control (Harris et al., 2008). In this sense, bricolage is employed by young people as a strategy to make change in response to the social contexts of their everyday lives.

**Using self-interest as a protection**

The second strategy participants adopt in practising their citizenship is to explain their practice as motivated by self-interest. Luoni frequently shares medical knowledge about HIV and suicide-related issues on Weibo. She explained in the interview that one of her purposes into doing this might be to disseminate some scientific knowledge and help to address some common ignorance and misunderstanding in society, but she stressed that:

This is not the primary or even secondary purpose. I am not specially writing these posts for a certain audience. I do this mainly for myself or my classmates whose medical knowledge levels are the same as mine.

这是一个目的，但是可能不是排名第一位、第二位的目的。就是我不是专门为某些读者而写。我主要是为我自己、或者是跟我知识基础应该是在差不多层面的同学而写。
This explanation appears consistent with Bennett & Segerberg’s (2012) observation that the nature of participation in the age of social media has been shifting away from a conventional collective form towards more personalised and expressive modes of engagement which are apparent in personal expressions of grievances, hopes, lifestyles and identities on social media. This cannot however explain Luoni’s response to the social impact her Weibo posts had produced.

When I told her that these posts did correct some of my misunderstandings about AIDS and suicide, she said, “I hope they can have this effect, it would definitely be for the best” (我希望它们有这样的效果，那就最好了). She also shared her happiness on Weibo when she saw that some of her posts were forwarded by lots of people, because “I saw that the values I try to export have affected more people” (我看见自己输出的价值观影响了更多人). She also mentioned on her page that a few of her followers started to do similar things on Weibo; she called this “values exported successfully” (成功地输出了价值观). It is obvious that the posts made by Luoni on Weibo were not purely for self-interest; she has expectations of a social effect for these posts.

The strategy of claiming self-interest to explain online activities of social value is also used by other participants. Xiaomeng said that his purpose in participating in online discussion of social events is not to change the unfolding and the result of the event, but to get experience and develop competence in understanding and analysing social events (收获体验和心得). Shihou sees the Weibo posts he made to public discussions as a record of his ideas, concerns and interests which show the trajectory of his self-development (一个我自己成长轨迹的记录). Although participants’ online activities are invested with implications for both self-interest and social benefit, their preference in using self-interest to account for these activities needs to be understood in relation to the structural settings of current Chinese society.
First, this strategy can protect their online activities from the possible attention of government authorities. Due to the ramifications of the Cultural Revolution in 1960s and the student movement on Tiananmen Square in 1989, citizens in China are still cautious about political engagement, despite the much more open and tolerant political atmosphere these days. Although younger generations have no direct experience of these political movements, their parents, who still hold memories of these movements, tend to instil in their only children the idea that politics is best left alone (Ash, 2013); thus, those children tend to de-politicise their social activities to avoid touching the nerve of authorities. At the same time, with the development of the market economy, the state has given plenty of recognition to the private sector and to the pursuit of private interests; hence self-interest was used as justification for their online activities seeking social and political change.

On the other hand, in the past decade or so, with growing social disparities and intensifying social contradictions within Chinese society, maintaining the stability of society (维稳, Weiwen) has become one of the top priorities of the current Chinese government (Shirk, 2007). The authorities keep a close eye on any civic activities which can potentially trigger collective action. Being aware of the capacity of the internet to mobilise collective action, screening collective action-related information online becomes a vital part of their effort to maintain social stability. This concern of the authorities was demonstrated in a quantitative study of the censorship practices of Chinese authorities on social media by King et al. (2013). According to their large-scale text analysis of censored and uncensored social media posts over time in 85 topic areas, they found that posts which criticised the state, its policies, and its leaders are tolerated to a large extent. Censorship of Chinese social media is mainly targeted at posts or comments which can potentially spur social mobilisation. Instead of suppressing people’s criticism of the state, censorship concerns itself more with forestalling collective action (King et al., 2013).
Due to this feature of Chinese authority’s censorship practice, the kind of citizenship practices narrated through private goals can be seen as a form of non-political and non-collective activity, and thus can escape the censorship of the authorities. This strategy echoes the strategies of “disguised collective action” used by aggrieved citizens in China to claim their rights (Fu, 2016). Since the party-state has long regulated tightly the social organisations which can coordinate or mobilise collective action, the cost of collective popular movements based on effective civil society organisations is extremely high. Popular movements to claim rights in China are therefore more likely to take an individual form. The study of Fu (2016) however shows that this form of individual action is different from pure individual actions which are described by Scott (1990) as “everyday resistance” or the “weapons of the weak”. It is a “disguised collective action” in which activists and civil society groups coach committed contenders to advance rights claims through direct but individual modes of confrontation with the state. This kind of action allows civil society groups to organize citizens who are under duress and to support their individual rights claims through individual actions which are tolerated by the regime. In this way, individuals can push local bureaucrats to address their personal grievances without engaging in perilous collective protests, while civil society groups can increase their chances of survival under the radar of the authorities (Fu, 2016).

The intent of this self-interest strategy encompasses much more than the avoidance of interference by the authorities. Subscribing to the motivation of self-interest can also protect not-for-profit pursuits from social suspicion and mockery. This suspicious attitude has two sources. One is the attenuation of the communist ideology and the dominance of neoliberalism in current Chinese society (Yan, 2009). The fact that a long-lasting political ideal, characterised by a host of lofty principles, was replaced by neoliberalism and a trend towards individualism in such a short period of time undermined the credibility of not-for-profit ideals. This stirred
people’s generally sceptical attitudes towards behaviours in the name of altruism or social benefit.

The other source of suspicion is the modern prevalence of pragmatic attitudes that are driven by intense material desires and the practices of consumerism in current Chinese society. In such a social setting, interests other than private ones - such as social justice, morality, and equality - are more likely to be viewed sceptically, or even be mocked. What is more interesting is that young people in China are the contributors to this social discourse. They actively criticise the incongruence of the sayings and doings of government officials using satire and online memes, which, to some extent, created the scepticism towards any not-for-profit interests. Apart from this, as they grew up during the growth of the market economy and the rise of individualism, they also identify with the values represented by the pursuit of self-interest and respect for personal choice. On the other hand, they are not satisfied with current society which is driven by the pursuit of self-interest and want to take the initiative to change it. In order to avoid becoming the object of the critical attitude towards altruism that they helped foster, they tend to camouflage their citizenship practices seeking social change with a self-interest disguise.

Third, disguising different dimensions of citizenship practice as private goals is a tactic for protecting and sustaining their motivation for social change. When I asked Zeqin why he still participates in online activities when he clearly understands that his participation has little effect, he said:

Many things, you need to do it, but you do not have to invest much expectation into it, ok? I mean, even though you know that you cannot actually change anything, but you should still do what you are capable of, but you should not expect anything from what you did, this way, you can protect yourself well, and can express yourself better.
很多事情呢，你要去做，但是你不一定要对它抱有希望。OK？就是说很多事情，就算你无能为力或者怎么样，但是自己能够应该力所能及的去做你能够做的一些事情，但是呢你不要对这个事情抱有希望，这样子的话，你就可以更好的保护好自己，以及更好的让自己表达出自己的意见。

Zeqin’s statement clearly shows that highlighting self-interest in accounting for his online activities for social change is a tactical choice to protect himself from the disappointment caused by his trivial power in improving society.

Although participants’ online activities are motivated by both their self-interest and their intention to bring change to their society, their preference to use the self-interest camouflage to explain these activities in the interview seems to contradict their actual online activity. By connecting this contradiction to its social context, I understand their accounting for their online activities for social change using the motivation of self-interest (whether facilitating self-development or simply releasing pent-up feelings) as their strategy; it motivates them to keep participating, to do what they can to improve their society, and it protects their motivation from being eroded by the powerlessness they experience in engaging with the social structures and discourses of China. Self-interest as an explanation can also protect their online activities from interference from the authorities and from the suspicion evident in current Chinese society towards the purposes of not-for-profit activities.

**Conclusion**

This chapter identified *angry youth, powerless cynics* and *realistic idealists* as three types of orientation manifested in participants’ online activities for social change. These orientations
can be concurrent, operating collectively in generating participants’ online activities in response to social conditions. Participants’ also adopt two main strategies in their endeavours for social change: 1) bricolage of social media and other available resources for civic participation; 2) claiming self-interest to protect their motivation and initiatives in trying to effect social change.

The playing out of these orientations and strategies is a dynamic and contingent process, collectively shaped by their experiences of social engagement (Lehmann, 2004), the conditions presented in their everyday lives, and their conceptions of the possible future they wish to materialise. This process fosters one’s consciousness of, and willingness to take action in response to the specific social, political and economic circumstances and processes of their time (White & Wyn, 1998). It is not merely about doing; it is also about subjective feelings, beliefs, and dispositions in relation to what is possible, and about action that can be taken in specific contexts of social structure and discourse. It is the embodied subjectivity in response to a specific time and social context (Evans, 2002). This subjectivity enables individuals to locate themselves in their social context and make changes to it.

Social contexts are the conditions under which subjectivities are negotiated, articulated and recognised as opposed to objects to resist. The integration of social media in people’s lives significantly expands the realm of their social engagement and allows space for them to reflect on their engagement with the institutions and other subjects in different social contexts. The formation of their inter-subjectivity under these circumstances represents an essential dimension of citizenship which reflects a person’s understanding of their social position and what this means for their participation in this very society (Wyn, 1995). The dynamic and flexible way in which participants’ online citizenship activities are shaped by their subjectivity also highlights the dynamic, subjective and contingent features of citizenship.
Chapter 8 Conclusion

Introduction

This study investigates how young people in China practice citizenship online, and the meaning of their online activities to them as citizens. I use the concept of citizenship as a lens through which to view their social and political engagement online. In order to get a holistic view of their online activities through this lens, I define citizenship as socially constructed practices through which individuals engage with different communities and (re)construct their notions of rights, duties and identities in relation to these communities. This definition broadens the notion of citizenship defined in legal and political terms, offering an inclusive framework of social and cultural citizenship through which Chinese young people’s everyday online activities can be examined.

To understand how citizenship is practised and shaped by young adults’ online activities, this study examined 31 young Chinese internet users’ online activities through observing their social media homepage. I then contextualised these digital footprints in specific social contexts by relating them to the young people’s accounts of their motivations for and details of their online activities as they were described in the interviews. I identified three dimensions through which their citizenship is practised, namely citizenship learning, identity formation, and action for social change. In the following section I review the findings and summarise my interpretation of young Chinese people’s citizenship practice. Next, I discuss the implications of these findings for the understanding of citizenship and detail the limitations of this research. The chapter closes with some suggestions for future work and a concluding remark.
Citizenship of Chinese youth

As a socially shaped practice, citizenship is both objectively shaped and subjectively formed. This reciprocal relationship between the objective and subjective dimensions of citizenship is manifested in people’s participatory activities in different social communities. These activities provide an ideal entry point for citizenship studies (Saward, 2006). My study of Chinese young people’s participatory activities on the Chinese internet reveals three intertwined themes of their online citizenship practice which sketches the contour of their notion of citizenship. This section recaps these themes and discusses how they contribute to the discussion of citizenship.

Online citizenship practice as learning

Learning is the first theme through which Chinese young people’s online citizenship practices can be understood. Their online practices can be understood as citizenship learning on two levels, both of which are embedded in their everyday online activities. One is their learning about online citizenship. This is a process of simultaneous learning and shaping the practices of the Weibo community through continuous engagement with other users in the community. The other is their learning about Chinese society, mediated by the Weibo community, that is, their internet mediated learning about Chinese citizenship.

Their learning about online citizenship is evident in their perceptions of the expectations of the Weibo community in relation to their engagement. These expectations include a degree of familiarity with the language practices of the Chinese internet. It entails competency in understanding and flexibly using the evolving online lexicons which share tacit meanings among internet users, and competency in using informal, accessible and concise language with humorous and sarcastic narratives. This language practice is drastically different from the rigid and formulaic language practice of many governmental television stations and newspapers, and marks out Weibo as an alternative platform for public expression and discussion.
Apart from language practice, participants also contribute to the practices of the Weibo community through their engagement with others on the platform. These practices include expectations for Weibo users to generate and disseminate “interesting” and “nutritious” content, and to participate in online activities such as discussions with rational commentary and a tolerant attitude. Participants also acknowledge and respect equal rights of expression, responsible content generation, and thoughtful information dissemination as the endorsed values in Weibo community. The practices of the online community, as illustrated by participants’ discussions and posts, are a joint enterprise that seeks to establish an equal and tolerant space, rich in reliable information and diverse opinions, which can support learning about Chinese society while nourishing informed, active, and fruitful public discussion. Due to the reciprocal relationship between community practices and community activities, users’ participatory activities on Weibo are also the vehicle through which citizenship is formed. Learning as a social practice is not merely a passive acquisition therefore, but also an active practice that contributes to the formation of community practices.

The second dimension of learning is internet-mediated learning about Chinese society. As the internet extends the realm of the community with which participants can engage, it exposes users to more diverse information and opinions than ever before, while also providing a channel through which participants can engage with communities they would not otherwise be able to access. In this sense, the internet works as a boundary object which offers a bridge for participants’ learning between the various practices of different social communities. By reconciling the meaning they make of Chinese society through engagement with communities in both virtual and physical spaces, participants make sense of their position in Chinese society, and form a landscape of practice from which their Chinese citizenship is drawn.
Online citizenship practice as identity formation

Identity formation is another key dimension of Chinese young people’s online citizenship practice. Through a poststructural perspective on identity, and using the concept of performativity, I examine participants’ engagement on the two major social media platforms in China, WeChat and Weibo. The nature of participants’ activities on Weibo as an identity performance is corroborated by their accounts of these activities as “self-labelling”, “building online name-card”, and “establishing personal brand/trademark/image”.

Their online identity performance is carried out in two dimensions. First, they perform an online identity by aligning their activities with the practices of the Weibo community (community language, norms, values and attitudes) that they have learnt through their engagement with this community. This performance can identify themselves to others as an insider of the online community, thus establishing their identity as an online citizen. This identity lays the foundation for the second dimension of their online identity performance, which is their identity performance online.

Participants perform identities differently on WeChat and Weibo due to the different social contexts of these platforms. On WeChat they tend to perform a normalized identity which is highly homogeneous with the identities they perform in physical life, mainly sharing “lightweight” content. This performance is conducted according to the norms and discourses of the communities with which they engage in their physical lives because WeChat aggregates all the people they know in their physical life and blurs the boundaries between different social contexts in that life. On Weibo, participants are inclined to perform the political and ideological values with which they identify. This performance enables them to connect with strangers who share values and interests with them and to form communities that subscribe to those values.
This performance helps them form and sustain their values-based identity without jeopardizing their relationships with friends in their physical lives, friends who may have different values.

Relating this practice of identity performance to the current Chinese social context, I argue that these two forms of performance enable them to experience two kinds of belonging, both of which are crucial for their wellbeing and their cohesive conception of citizenship in relation to Chinese society. Performances on WeChat can give participants a presence in pre-existing social networks which can serve to strengthen the sense of self that they enact in their physical lives. It enables them to experience a sense of belonging distinguished by immediacy of connection, crucial in the dislocated, fast-paced and atomized metropolitan lives that many experience. Weibo enables young Chinese to form a values-based identity, receiving recognition from the community of strangers who share similar values. The sense of belonging they achieve from their engagement with Weibo serves as a compass for them to navigate the world of values in the often-confusing context of contemporary Chinese society. Weibo also enables participants to explore and discuss rather than simply to rebel against aspects of society that they find troubling.

**Subjective dimensions of online citizenship practice**

Third, participants’ online citizenship practices can also be understood as initiatives for social change. These initiatives are shaped by three basic types of orientations in specific contexts. These orientations, underpinned by participants’ subjectivity in each specific context, function concurrently and vary in salience in generating their online participatory activities.

The first type of subjective orientation is “angry youth”. This orientation is typically demonstrated in expressions of strong opinions about or criticisms of political and social issues using harsh or even extreme language. Although the affective participation powered mainly by
the “angry youth” orientation is experienced as less meaningful by participants due to its limited contribution to the formation and operation of the traditional public sphere, I argue that this participation can increase the awareness of an issue by amplifying people’s sense of urgency to act. It can also bridge their political and personal lives and enable individuals to experience connection and affiliation with affective publics, mobilising and connecting them through expressions of sentiment.

The second type of orientation, “powerless cynics”, denotes the dominance of a subjectivity characterised by individual powerlessness in encounters with social structures. Their cynical expressions of powerlessness are at the same time an infra-political expression through which young people express dissatisfaction in an unobtrusive way and construct a collective identity. The third type of orientation is “realistic idealist”, which features a subjectivity that leverages available opportunities to do things that are feasible in bringing about the social change they want to see, while being realistic about the possible result. This orientation not only shows their capacity to imagine the future as an idealist, but also their willingness to build a bridge to this future with actions they take in the present, as realists.

By analysing the concurrent functioning of these three orientations in generating participants’ online activities, I also identified two strategies employed by participants in conducting these activities aimed at social change. Using a strategy of bricolage, they leverage every opportunity to “be the change” they want for themselves and their society. The second strategy is arguing self-interest as the motivation for their initiatives towards social change. They use this strategy as a disguise to protect their online activities from interference by the authorities and from the suspicion, arising from the pragmatism prevalent in current Chinese society, about the purposes of altruistic activities. It is also a strategy they use to protect their motivation for engaging in activities directed at social change from being eroded by the powerlessness they experience in their social engagement.
The three orientations are underpinned by the different status of subjectivities formed through participants’ engagement with the Chinese society that they experience in both virtual and physical spaces. The varying salience of these in shaping highly diverse online activities demonstrates the fluid and contingent nature of an individual’s subjectivity. Socially embedded, it unfolds with one’s active engagement with the power relationships in different social communities. Subjectivity defines the extent to which one can “exist as a subject of initiative and responsibility” in specific social contexts (Biesta, G., 2015, p. 77). It is rooted in social structure but not determined by it. Social structure and power relations in specific social contexts are the conditions under which subjectivities are negotiated, articulated and recognised. Different from socialisation, which is mainly concerned with assimilating individuals into “existing ways of doing and being” (Biesta, G. J., 2015, p. 20), subjectivity is a nexus of subjective feeling, belief, and disposition based on one’s social context, access to resources, and previous social engagement experiences. It informs one’s decisions about what is do-able and what actions can be taken in specific contexts of social structure and discourse.

In the practice of online participation, social media significantly expands the realm of young people’s social engagement while allowing space for them to reflect on their engagement with institutions and other subjects in different social contexts. This intensifies and facilitates the formation of their subjectivity. This socially situated process constitutes an essential dimension of their citizenship which reflects their understanding of their social position and what this means for their participation in this particular society (Wyn, 1995), that is, their Chinese citizenship.

In summary, the online citizenship practice of the participants in this study illustrates two types of citizenship. One is online citizenship. It is practised through aligning one’s online activities
with the practices in Chinese online communities and contributing to forming and developing these practices. The other is Chinese citizenship. This citizenship is practised through young people’s internet-mediated engagement with the social contexts/networks that they access online.

The meaning of their practices within these two types of citizenship can be understood in three dimensions. The first is citizenship learning. Their practice of these two types of citizenship is the process by which they engage with the social and cultural communities to which these citizenships are related. Through this process, they learn the definitive elements of these citizenships, such as the norms and practices of the communities, as well as their position in and relationship with these communities. The second meaning they ascribe to their online citizenship practices is identity formation. In this dimension, their practice of online citizenship is their performance of online identity according to the language practices, norms and discourses on the Chinese internet. Their practice of Chinese citizenship takes the form of internet-mediated performance of their identities to the different communities and social networks they could access on the internet. These performances, which are shaped by the dominant norms and practices of their particular social network, enable different senses of belonging, and illustrate their efforts to navigate their identity work in the social reality they experience, rather than simply disconnecting or rebelling against that social reality. The third meaning reflects action for social change. Their online activities are generated by the collective functioning of three basic types of orientation of action, underpinned by the fluid and contingent process of their subjectivity formation. These actions are conscious attempts to bring change to the Chinese reality they experience in virtual and physical spaces in their everyday lives.
Theoretical implications for citizenship studies

Citizenship in this study is defined as socially constructed practices through which individuals engage with different communities. I have no intention of disavowing the political status dimension of citizenship which still plays a significant role in ensuring civil rights and shaping people’s conceptions of their relationship with the state; rather, I want to extend the explanatory power and scale of the concept by treating the “imagined community” (Anderson, 2006) of nation-state as one of the communities to which one’s citizenship could relate, or one of the contextual factors that contribute to shaping one’s relationship with other communities with which one directly or indirectly engages. This approach has proved rewarding in connection with the findings of this research.

First, this study proposes a practice-based three-dimensional model (shown in Figure 8.1) which can be used to understand the citizenship practised by Chinese young people online. Relationships between individuals and social communities, as the point of departure in understanding Chinese young people’s notion of citizenship, are shaped by their online social engagement, a concurrent process of citizenship learning, identity formation, and generation of social change.

The first dimension through which we might understand young Chinese people’s practices of citizenship is citizenship learning. Their online participation is a learning process for them in which they explore the possibilities and make meaning of the practices of communities with which they need to or could engage. The process of identity formation embodied in young people’s performance of the norms, values, and practices of different social communities is another entry point for understanding their citizenship practices. The process of subjectivity formation, which enables individuals to forge their consciousness and willingness to position themselves in current social situations, to navigate their way across different communities, and
at the same time to imagine and realise the change they want for these communities, provides the third access point to this understanding of the citizenship of young people.

**Figure 8.1 Three-dimensional citizenship model**

![Three-dimensional citizenship model](image)

Second, this study, through its examination of the significance of Chinese young people’s online engagement with different socio-cultural communities, provides further evidence of the need for the notion of social and cultural citizenship. In contrast to the status dimension of citizenship defined by the nation-state, the notion of social and cultural citizenship highlights the multiple, fluid and relational nature of young people’s citizenship (or rather, experience of citizenships) in today’s fragmented and diverse post-industrial age. As argued by Stevenson (2004), the examining of citizenship in this period demands more of a focus on cultural citizenship. This form of citizenship, demonstrated in the “processes of bonding and community building, and reflection on that bonding”, noted by Hermes (2006), is the form of citizenship “which we are well familiar with but have failed to understand nevertheless as the unruly but necessary input for more formally defined citizenships” (p. 303).

In today’s digital age, cultural citizenship has inevitably come to the fore of citizenship practice. The online citizenship practices discussed in this study, such as the online community building
and identity formation practices on WeChat and Weibo, would not have been analysed without this community-related notion of cultural citizenship. This inclusive view of citizenship embraces the constructive social participation model which acknowledges what young people already do as citizens rather than making young people engage in certain civic and citizenship activities (Lister, 2008; Smith et al., 2005). It also echoes Anita Harris’s study of young Australians’ everyday encounters with multiculturalism which indicates that young people “figure citizenship in its most basic forms, in terms of protection, rights and membership” (Harris, 2013, p. 135).

Third, this study shows that belonging is a useful concept in the analysis of citizenship. “Belonging” interfaces the concepts of identity, space, and citizenship; hence the question of where and how young people belong can lead us to scrutinise how young people position themselves in different social contexts and situations. This study shows that young people’s citizenship is about finding their sense of belonging by learning about the practices in online communities, forming their collective identity based on this practice, and then practising or reshaping them in their daily lives. The sense of belonging they experience on WeChat reflects their efforts to position themselves in contemporary Chinese society, as it is. In contrast, the belonging young people experience on Weibo demonstrates is reflected in initiatives to change Chinese society into one that they long for. Their effort to reconcile these two kinds of belonging in their current existence sketches the contours of their citizenship.

Furthermore, this study illuminates the development of citizenship in a digital age. Hermes (2006) argues that citizenship in the digital age has expanded from the notion of “informed audience” to the “making of publics”. The norm of “being informed” as a qualified citizen has been overtaken in the mass media age by diverse practices of cultural citizenship which involves building both communities and shared identities. The different citizenship practices
that participants pursue on WeChat and Weibo show the value of the internet in enabling new forms of citizenship practice: the forming of shared identities and the re-shaping of one’s notion of citizenship as a whole. Their deeply normalised identity performance on WeChat, and the values-based identity performance on Weibo illustrate the complex relationship between the “people who constitute society and the technologies that provide both capacities and constraints on action” (Howard, 2016, p. 715).

In addition, as young people’s online engagement has been seamlessly woven into their social engagement in physical life, online citizenship has become an indispensable part of the citizenship practised and shaped in those everyday social engagements. In contrast to the perceived democratic risks posed by young people’s declining participation in conventional civic and political activities and the concomitant “deficit model” of young people’s citizenship (Osler & Starkey, 2003), more recent studies maintain that young people’s civic and political engagement is not declining but is relocating or taking different forms (Harris et al., 2010). Against this backdrop, online spaces, as shown in this study, have become one of the major sites to which their civic and political participation is relocate. Moreover, investigation of online participation can shed light on young people’s negotiation of their social position, reveal the institutional and structural barriers to young people’s social engagement and experience of belonging, and can help us to understand the present and the future of a society.

This study also sheds light on the interactive relationship between different kinds and forms of citizenship. A large part of participants’ practice of online citizenship in this study can also be regarded as the online part of their practice of Chinese citizenship. The values upheld by their practice of online citizenship such as equality and democracy illustrate the qualities they seek to embed in their Chinese citizenship. The identities they perform online either mirror the self they perform in physical life, or illustrate the identity they feel uncomfortable performing, or
unsafe performing in physical life. The senses of belonging they experience through their practice of online citizenship are largely those they can rarely access in their physical lives. Virtual communities have significantly extended the realm of their citizenship practice by supporting their sociality in connecting and interacting with known and unknown people.

As an empirical study of citizenship of Chinese young people, this study complements the literature of citizenship studies with empirical examples from a digital and Chinese context. It extends the dominant political perspective of Chinese citizenship and internet studies to a sociological one, which enables a more inclusive view of young people’s practices on the Chinese internet. As shown in this and other studies (Wang, 2013), online citizenship practices in China are predominantly about managing individuals’ engagement with the online community, and handling internet-mediated engagement with different social networks (pre-existing social networks and the networks formed by connecting with strangers with similar Sanguan). It is less about direct engagement with institutions and government. These practices provide us with a window to understanding the process of young people’s learning and negotiation of their social positions in a drastically changing Chinese society. It also illustrates the society to which young people want to belong and showcases their effort in building a bridge to this future society through their everyday online activities.

**Practical implications for citizenship learning/education**

The online citizenship practice of Chinese young people presents practical implications for citizenship learning. First, the community-related concept of citizenship extends the source of citizenship learning from the school setting to people’s everyday lives. It also extends the content of citizenship education, normally aimed at cultivating competent citizens of a nation-state, to a literacy generated through one’s engagement with and flexible navigation across the practices in different communities. This literacy was described as “a capacity to live well in
diversity” in Harris’s (2013, p. 137) study of young Australians who live in multicultural communities. Participants’ competence in engaging with different social networks via the internet indicates their capacity to live well in diverse communities, defined by the practices of these communities. This capacity is acquired through their everyday social engagement activities. Another dimension to be noted is that this learning process is not passive or one-dimensional. It is also a process through which community practices are shaped and reproduced, and in which participants are learners and generators of citizenship knowledge at the same time (Pattison-Meek, 2016). The content of citizenship is subject to configuring and reconfiguring by the evolving practices of the communities one engages with in a lifetime.

Citizenship learning, therefore, is not necessarily generating the citizenship practices educators expect from young people. Instead, this study has shown how online practices enable young people to recognise social engagement activities as citizenship practice in their own right. These practices facilitate learning about citizenship by supporting socially constructive participation in different social communities (Smith et al., 2005). The outcomes of the online citizenship practices of Chinese young people illustrated in this study strongly support this understanding of citizenship.

Second, as an extended venue for citizenship learning, the internet is not only effectively used by study participants to maintain and consolidate their citizenship in relation to their pre-existing social networks, but also enables a new sociality for participants by connecting with strangers who share values with them, generating new forms of citizenship. In this sense, citizenship is not simply about disconnecting from or rebelling against the society in which one lives, but is a practice of tactically positioning oneself in everyday social realities. Citizenship learning is about shaping the norms and practices that ignite young people’s interaction with institutions, social and cultural communities, and individuals (Wang, 2013); it is learning that
addresses the issue of “how people live together” (Veugelers, 2011, p. 209); therefore, what is needed for effective citizenship learning for young people is not simply education but a friendly and supportive social context in which their social engagement can flourish.

This study also shows the importance of the virtual space as a venue for citizenship learning. As the internet has become an integral space and medium for young people’s social participation, their online activities should be acknowledged as a way for them to learn about existing forms of citizenship and to explore and construct emerging forms of citizenship, both processes being beyond the capacity of formal citizenship education. This online process of citizenship learning and formation constitutes an essential part of young peoples’ landscape of practices upon which their notion of citizenship is drawn.

Third, this study shows that a possible way to construct more practical and effective approaches to support citizenship learning is to find out where young people belong. By looking at practices in the communities through which young people experience a sense of belonging, we can understand where they want to be, with whom they want to be, and with what they wish to identify themselves. This approach not only recognises existing, everyday engagement as citizenship practice; it also informs the creation of supportive environments and participatory activities which are conducive to the occurrence of young people’s citizenship learning (Smith et al., 2005). More importantly, this approach builds understanding of the structural and institutional barriers for young people’s citizenship practice, as well as illuminating the challenges and constraints they face in negotiating their social positions, searching for their subjectivities in a changing society, and becoming a fully participating member of the society in which they live.
Finally, this study has significant meaning for citizenship education and learning in China. The internet has become one of the major sites for young Chinese to learn about Chinese society, to connect with their peers, and to form identities of different kinds in the process of negotiating their notions of citizenship; however, there is still a strong conservative discourse emphasising the negative effects of the dissemination of the internet in schools, or even in universities, a discourse that warns against addiction to online games or the effects of social media on students’ learning (Liu, 2010; Liu, 2011a). If the standardized education system (compulsory education in particular) in China has not allowed enough space for Chinese students’ social engagement through which they can develop a reasonable understanding of Chinese society and their relationship with it, a more open attitude and discourse in relation to young people’s use of the internet can at least give them an accessible channel for social engagement and citizenship learning outside formal education.

Methodological reflections
This is a qualitative and interpretive study. It is not intended to produce replicable results which are generalisable to the whole body of the young Chinese population. The aim of this study is to contribute to the field of citizenship studies by providing an in-depth understanding of a particular pattern of citizenship practice through which a specific group of urban Chinese young people experience citizenship and form their notions of citizenship in current Chinese society. This study drew on a sample of 31 participants who are diverse in terms of age, occupation, and education level, giving considerable richness to the empirical data of this study. Consistent with qualitative methodologies, the analysis of their engagements with the online platforms WeChat and Weibo was intended to provide evidence that could be used to explore themes and illustrate conceptual ideas, and this is what it has done. The qualitative data has enabled a rich exploratory analysis of young Chinese internet users’ online practices, involving a critical reassessment of the notion of citizenship.
The focus of this study on Weibo and WeChat is a possible limitation. There is a wide range of social media platforms on the Chinese internet serving the various requirements of users and conglomerate users of different kinds. This wide range of platforms has not simply arisen from people’s demands and interests, but also indicates deep social divisions, very different education levels, and a variety of cultural tastes which drive internet users’ adoption of particular online platforms and determine the conduct of their online activities. This study only investigated some of the online practices of a specific group of young people; however, based on the interactive relationship between their different citizenships in relation to different virtual and physical communities, and considering that Weibo and WeChat are the two dominant social media platforms adopted by young Chinese internet users, this thesis still provides useful insights into their notion of citizenship in relation to Chinese society, that is, an organic integration of their engagement in multiple communities in both their physical and virtual lives.

**Directions for future research**

As discussed in the previous section, this study only examined the citizenship practice of a specific group of young people on Weibo and WeChat. More empirical studies of citizenship practice on other social media platforms, such as Qzone, Zhihu and Momo, need to be conducted to generate a more comprehensive picture of young people’s online citizenship practices on the Chinese internet.

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54 Qzone is a social networking website created by Tencent (the same company as WeChat) in 2005. It is similar to Myspace, provided by MSN. Qzone allows users to write blogs, keep diaries, share photos, music and videos. It also provides value-added services such as templates and accessories that users can purchase to customize and decorate their homepages on Qzone according to their personal preferences.


56 A popular location-based mobile social networking platform launched in August, 2011. It enables users to check out people nearby, share their geographical locations, and connect with each other. It supports instant messaging, short-form video sharing and live streaming.
The broadened notion of citizenship proposed in this study provides a theoretical framework for identifying unrecognized democratic potential. Given the rapid expansion of social media - which goes hand in hand with a drastically changing, socio-political, economic and cultural context in current Chinese society, new forms of online communities and activities are always worthy of scholarly attention. Although we cannot take it for granted that new technology will induce new citizenship practice, it is necessary to pay attention to the political and democratic commitment which is evident on the grounds afforded by the new media and communication technology (Hermes, 2006).

Another possible direction of future research is exploration of the possibilities offered by, and ways of bridging new forms of civic and political participation and traditional forms – from which young people are increasingly alienated. This connection is of great significance in figuring out “how political and democratic commitment can be grounded” (Hermes, 2006, p. 304). On the one hand, conventional political institutions need to be aware of where today’s young people are and where they belong before they make an effort to engage them or re-engage with them. On the other hand, emerging forms of engagement still need to find ways of exercising power through traditional social and political institutions: they are still the infrastructure on which the operation of political systems in most societies is based. This connection between new and traditional forms of citizenship may also facilitate the transition of everyday, experienced cultural citizenship, based on bonding and community building, into more formal citizenships which can inform youth policies, services, and reforms in the way politics is conducted (Hermes, 2006; Smith et al., 2005). This work has special significance to China, a country usually referred to as an authoritarian state, which is actively exploring and experimenting with paths to democracy at both state and societal level.
Final remarks

I came to this topic with a mentality of an engineer. My original intention in pursuing this study was to locate the weaknesses and problems in the citizenship literacy of Chinese young people through examining their online citizenship practices, and then finding ways to fix them. The complexities and nuances of my participants’ everyday online citizenship practices, however, and my study of the literature in the field of youth studies and citizenship studies (my researcher praxis, using Schon’s (1983) term) showed me that citizenship is a fluid, dynamic, multi-layered and multi-dimensional concept. It is both objective and subjective. The citizenship practice of Chinese young people is a learning process through which they make sense of the practices of the virtual and physical communities with which they engage on a daily basis. In this engagement process, they work out how Chinese society operates, and how they should position themselves in this dynamic and transforming society. This is also a process in which they form their awareness of, and willingness to come to terms with the current situation, and to bring about the change they want for themselves and for their society.

Alongside the transformation of my understanding of citizenship, my idea of citizenship education has also changed from a “citizenship deficit model”, which focuses on interventions to promote youth participation and develop young people into qualified citizens, to an inclusive view which starts with recognition of young people’s social engagement as citizenship practice and acknowledges “what young people already do as citizens” (Smith et al., 2005, p. 441). Devoted as it was to understanding what Chinese young people do online as citizens, this study is now becoming the start of my journey to understanding their social practices as citizens, to seeking social recognition of these practices, and to working for a more supportive social environment for their citizenship practice.
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Appendix 1 Consent form for participants (English)

PROJECT TITLE: A Study of Online Citizenship Practices of Chinese Young People

Name of participant:

Name of investigator: Jun Fu

I give my consent to participate in this research as follows:

1. I consent to participate in this project named above. The details of the interview have been explained to me. A written copy/soft copy of the information has been given to me to keep.
2. I authorise the research team to use data I provide in the interview for this research, in accordance with privacy policy.
3. I acknowledge that:
   a. the possible effects of participating in the interview have been explained to my satisfaction;
   b. I understand I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data I have provided;
   c. the project is for the purpose of research;
   d. I understand that the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements;
   e. I have been informed that the interview will be audio-taped, and my name will be referred to by pseudonym in any publications arising from the research.

☐ I understand the above details and agree to participate in the research.

Signature of participant: Date:

Researchers: Prof. Johanna Wyn, Dr. Hernan Cuervo & Mr. Jun Fu

HREC Ethics ID: 1443239.1 Date: 10/04/15

Melbourne Graduate School of Education
The University of Melbourne Victoria 3010 Australia
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Appendix 2 Consent form for participants (Chinese)

研究项目：中国青年网上公民实践研究

参与者姓名：

研究人员姓名：付俊

作为本研究的参与者，我同意如下内容：

1. 我同意参与本研究项目，研究人员已经向我解释了有关本研究的相关细节，并
   向我发放了一份有关这些细节的纸质/电子版的书面说明。

2. 我授权本项目的研究者根据相关保密规则使用我在本研究的访谈中提供的数据。

3. 我可以确认：
   a) 项目研究人员已经向我充分解释了参与本研究的访谈可能产生的影响。
   b) 我知道我可以随时退出本研究，并且撤销已经提供给研究者的研究数据。
   c) 本项目以研究为唯一目的。
   d) 我明白我为本研究所提供的信息将受到严格的保护。
   e) 我已经被告知访谈内容将会被录音。本项目所发表的所有成果在使用我的
      姓名时将使用假名或做匿名处理。

□ 我充分理解上述内容，并愿意参与本项目的研究。

参与者签名：

日期：

研究人员： Johanna Wyn 教授，Hernan Cuervo 博士，付俊

HREC Ethics ID: 1443239.1

Date: 10/04/15

澳大利亚墨尔本大学，维多利亚省，墨尔本教育研究院，3010，

电话：+61 3 8344 8285 传真：+61 3 8344 8529 网址：www.education.unimelb.edu.au
Appendix 3 Plain language statement (English)

A Study of Online Citizenship Practices of Chinese Young People

Dear _________________ (username of internet user in online community).

Thank you very much for reading this letter.

I am a research student at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne, Australia. My colleagues and I are doing research on online civic and political participation of Chinese internet users. By investigating the engagement of Chinese internet users in online activities (such as online discussion) about some social events, together with interviews of their experience in participating in these activities, we want to explore how their citizenship is practised online and how their concept of citizenship is shaped by their online participatory activities in a Chinese social context.

Our research results will inform thinking about the improvement of moral and civic education in China, and enrich the discussion about the establishment of effective institutions for public deliberation and participation. Your participation is essential for our study, and we sincerely hope that you can help us with this study.

If you are willing to participate, you will be asked to do an interview of about 45 minutes to 1 hour. The interview will focus on your experience of participating in these online activities, your views towards these activities, and your considerations during your engagement in these activities. The interview will have a few questions seeking some general demographic information, but no questions about specific personal information will be asked. The interview will be conducted face-to-face if conditions allow; otherwise, it will be conducted by phone or Skype.

For the convenience of data analysis, interviews will be tape-recorded. All the data collected will be strictly safeguarded by the researchers. Participants will only be referred to by pseudonym in any publication arising from the research. All the data collected during this research will be securely stored then destroyed five years after the final publication with transcripts shredded and digital recordings deleted.
Your participation is entirely voluntary. Even if you have decided to participate, you can still opt to pull out if you wish. You can stop the interview at any time; if you do so, none of the information you have given to the researchers will be used in the study.

Should you have any questions about this research, please feel free to ask; we will try our best to answer your questions. Should you have any concerns about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Melbourne using the contact information below.

Human Research Ethics Committee
Tel: +61 3 8344 2073
Fax: +61 3 9347 6739

This information sheet is for you to keep. Thank you!

Yours faithfully

Prof. Johanna Wyn (Principal supervisor) Dr. Hernan Curevo (Second supervisor)
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Email: j.wyn@unimelb.edu.au Email: hicuervo@unimelb.edu.au
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中国青年网上公民实践研究

研究陈述

亲爱的________（网民在网络社区的用户名），您好，

首先非常感谢您阅读这份邀请信。

我是一名墨尔本大学教育学院的在读博士。我和我的同事正在进行一项关于中国网民的网上参与行为的研究。通过了解中国网民对一些网络事件的参与活动（如在线讨论），结合对他们参与这些网上活动的经验的访谈，我们想了解他们是如何实践公民权利，以及这种实践所体现的对公民身份概念的理解在中国社会环境中的形成过程。

我们的研究将产生对中国道德和公民教育的发展具有借鉴意义和参考价值的结论，同时，它也将进一步丰富学术界对如何在中国建立有效的公共参与机制的讨论。您的参与对于本研究至关重要。我们衷心希望得到您的帮助。

如果您愿意参与此项研究，您只需要帮助我们完成一个大约30分钟到1个小时的访谈。我们的访谈将主要围绕您对特定网络事件的经验，您个人对这些经验的看法和考量，以及形成这些参与行为的个人和社会因素展开。访谈将包括一些基本的人口统计信息的问题，但不会涉及具体的个人信息。访谈将尽量以面对面的形式进行，如果我们的研究人员无法进行面对面的访谈，我们将通过网络视频或者电话完成访谈。

为方便访谈数据的后续分析，访谈过程将会被录音。本研究所收集的访谈内容将严格保密。所有研究成果（如论文和研究报告）对访谈内容的引用将做匿名处理。本研究所收集的所有研究数据将会在项目成果发表后的5年内全部销毁。您对本项目的参与完全基于自愿的原则。您可以随时选择退出本项目的研究，而且在您确定退出本研究后，我们也不会使用已经收集到的与您有关的数据。

如果您对本研究有任何疑问，欢迎您与我们联系，我们将竭力解答你的问题，以争取获得您对本研究的支持。如果您对本研究开展的方式有任何疑问，也欢迎您联络墨尔本大学研究伦理委员会。该委员会的联络方式为：电话：+61 3 8344 2073，传真：+61 3 9347 6739。
这份信交给您惠存，衷心感谢您的支持和参与！

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Appendix 5 Interview questions (English)

A Study of Online Citizenship Practices of

Chinese Young People

Interview Questions

1. Personal information:

1. What is your age?
2. What is the highest level of education you have completed? What did you study?
3. How do you describe your current professional or employment status? What job are you currently doing?
4. Do you live by yourself? Or with partner or family?

Section 1: How citizenship is practised online by Chinese internet users.

1. How do you usually get access to the internet? Do you use desktop, laptop, mobile phone or tablet? Where do you usually access the internet? How do you rank them, according to the time you spent on them, in relation to your work and study?
2. I saw you participated in the online discussion of xxx (name of social event). Do you often participate in online discussions about social events? Is it the only way you participate in or get information about online events? Are there any other activities that you pursue to get information about and participate in these events?
3. How often do you engage in these activities? Which website do you usually go to, or what apps do you usually use to conduct these online activities? What kinds of people or institutions are you following on Microblog (Chinese version of Twitter)? Could you give
me some examples? What kind of social and political events are you usually interested in participating in online? Why? Can you give me an example?

4. Could you tell me some of your experiences of participation in online civic and political activities? Can you provide an example? What have you learnt from these experiences?

Section 2: How online citizenship practice shapes the notion of citizenship among Chinese internet users

1. Why do you conduct these activities online? What do your online participatory activities mean to you?

2. How do you understand your relationship with your local community, Chinese society, and the Chinese government in terms of your rights, duties and identity? Where do you think these understandings come from? How do you see the relationship between your online participation and your understanding of these relationships?

3. What is your opinion of people’s participation (such as online discussion) in online social events? Do you think people should care about these online social and political events? Why? What are the effects it might have on our society and country?

4. What does it mean to be Chinese? What is your image of a typical Chinese person? Is it the same as the image of a qualified and ideal Chinese person in your mind? Can you give me an example (a person, a cultural issue, norms and values, an event)? What are the unique characteristics of an ideal Chinese person? Does your understanding of being Chinese or an ideal Chinese person have any relationship with your online participation? How? Can you give me an example?

5. What makes a good citizen? Can you give me an example? Are you a good citizen? Why? Does your idea of citizen have any relationship with your concern about and participation in social events online? Does your online participation help you to be/become a good citizen? How? Could you give me an example?

6. What is your image of a netizen (internet user who is actively involved in online communities)? What are the most important qualities of a qualified netizen? Do you count
yourself as a netizen? Is a qualified netizen a good citizen? What does the netizen mean for Chinese society?

7. Do you think your online participation helps you to make sense/meaning of Chinese society?

Section 3: The effect of social context on online citizenship practice and notions of citizenship

1. Why do you engage in the online activities that you’ve mentioned before? If that is the reason, do you think participating in online activities can achieve your purpose? Why do you choose to participate in this way? What makes you use this means of participation in online activities?

2. According to your experience, what are the dos and don’ts of participation online? Why?

3. How is online participation in political and social events different from offline participation, such as street protest, outdoor petitioning? If the government allows, will you participate in offline collective activities? In what kind of offline activities (such as volunteer work, entertainment activities or street protest) are you most likely to engage? What are your main considerations in choosing offline activities in which to participate? Can you provide an example?

4. In your comment on xx event, you said xxx. Why did you comment on this event this way? How did you come to that opinion? What were your considerations while you were formulating this post?

5. Do you discuss social and political issues with your families and friends? What is the difference between online discussion of these issues and the discussions in your real life?

6. Can online participation satisfy all your needs for civic and political participation at local/provincial/national level? Do you think it is necessary to have knowledge of the avenues for civic and political participation to be able to act? Between online and offline civic and political participation, which medium do you prefer? Why?
Appendix 6 Interview questions (Chinese)

中国青年网上公民实践研究

访谈提纲

1. 个人信息:

1. 您的年龄是?

2. 您的教育背景是?

3. 您目前的职业状况是?

4. 你的居住状况是?

第一部分: 互联网用户的在线公民实践方式

1. 你通常如何上网？用台式电脑，笔记本电脑，手机还是平板电脑？你通常在哪里上网？按上网所用的时间排序（工作和学习时间除外），以上上网时间和地点是怎样的顺序？

2. 我看到你曾参与了 xx 事件的网上讨论，你经常参与社会事件的在线讨论吗？参与在线讨论是你获取相关社会事件的信息和参与社会事件的唯一方式吗？你还会通过哪些方式获取与相关社会事件有关的信息，并参与这些社会事件？

3. 你参与这些活动的频率如何？通常去哪些网站，用哪些网络应用来参与这些在线的活动？你在微博上通常关注哪些人或机构？能举一些例子吗？你对参与哪些社会和政治事件感兴趣？为什么？能举一些例子吗？

4. 能告诉我一些你参与网上的社会活动和政治活动的经历吗？能举一些例子吗？你从这些经验中学到了什么，有怎样的体会？
第二部分：在线公民实践与互联网用户公民资格和公民权利概念的形塑关系

1. 你为什么会在网上从事这些活动？你在网上各种社会事件的参与活动对你来讲意味着什么？

2. 就所拥有的权利、义务和身份认同而言，你如何理解你与你所在的社区、中国社会、政府之间的关系？你对这些关系的理解来自哪里？你如何看你对这些关系的理解与你的网络使用，以及在线参与之间的关系？

3. 你如何看待对网络事件的参与行为（比如参与在线讨论）？你认为人民是否应该关注这些网上的社会和政治事件？为什么？你认为这些关注和参与会对我们的社会和国家产生怎样的影响？

4. 作为一个中国人意味着什么？你对典型中国人的印象是怎样的？这个印象跟你心目中合格的/理想的中国人的形象一样吗？你能否举个例子（一个人，一个文化问题，社会规范或者价值观，或事件等等）？一个理想的中国人应该具有哪些素质或者特征？哪些是作为一个中国人特有的？你对中国人的这些概念的形成与你对网络的使用和你的在线参与有关吗？如何相关？能举个例子吗？

5. 一个好公民的特质有哪些？能举个例子吗？你是一个好公民吗？为什么？你对好公民的概念的形成与你对网络社会事件的关注和参与有关吗？你对网络事件的参与对你做一个/成为一个好公民有帮助吗？有怎样的帮助，能举个例子吗？

6. 你对网民的印象是怎样的？一个合格的网民所需要具有的最重要的品质是什么？你认为自己是网民吗？一个合格的网民是一个好公民吗？网民对中国社会有什么作用？

7. 你认为你的在线参与对你理解中国社会和中国政治有帮助吗？

第三部分：中国社会环境对在线公民参与和公民身份/权利概念的影响

1. 你为什么要参与之前提到的那些在线活动？如果是因为这样的原因，你觉得你的参与达到你最初的目的了吗？你为什么选择以这样的方式参与？是什么原因促使你采用这样的方式进行在线参与？

2. 根据你的经验，在线参与有哪些是可以做的，哪些不可以？为什么？
3. 你认为在线的政治和社会参与和现实生活中的参与，比如上街抗议，有什么不同？如果政府允许，你会参加现实生活中的集体行动吗？你可能会参与哪些实际的集体活动（比如志愿者工作，娱乐活动，街头抗争）？你选择要参与的现实生活中的社会和政治活动时，你会主要考虑哪些因素？能举个例子吗？

4. 在你对 xx 事件的评论中，你说道“xxx”。你为什么会这样评论这个事件？是什么原因让你对这个事件做出了这样的评论？你在写这条评论的时候有哪些考虑？

5. 你会跟家人和朋友讨论社会和政治问题吗？在网络上讨论这些问题和在你的实际生活中讨论这些问题有什么不一样？能举个例子吗？

6. 在线参与能够满足你参与社会和政治活动的所有需求吗？你认为人们有必要了解可能的进行社会和政治参与的方式以便从事相关的参与活动吗？对于在线和离线的社会和政治参与，你更喜欢哪种方式？为什么？
Appendix 7 Basic information and pseudonyms of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Profession</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cimi</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
<td>Sophomore majoring in architecture at a university in Jinan (an eastern city in China)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Duanyi</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Public relations manager at Sassoon in Beijing (Capital city of China)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Duoduo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Undergraduate student from Shandong province studying at a university in Seoul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Gasion</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Programmer working at China Unicom in Guangzhou (a metropolitan city in southern China)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Haoru</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Marketing officer at a commercial website for backpackers in Shenzhen (a southern city next to Hong Kong)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Huaxia</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Fresh graduate, majored in journalism in Xinxiang, Henan province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Jiahao</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Fresh graduate from a college of architecture in Beijing, works for an architecture studio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lingzi</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>News reporter at a newspaper in Foshan (a prefecture-level city in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Occupation/Position</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Lulu</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Nutritionist at a hospital in Beijing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Luoni</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>PhD candidate at a medical school in Beijing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Miwen</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Student counsellor at a university in Guangzhou</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Panpan</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Entrepreneur who runs a small educational company in Beijing</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Qingqing</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>Lecturer at a university in Suzhou (a city in eastern China)</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Shenqi</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>Master</td>
<td>Investment consultant at a bank in Guangzhou</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Shenying</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Editor at a Television Station in Guangzhou</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Shihou</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
<td>Senior student at a university in Guangzhou</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Shijie</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
<td>Junior student from Shandong province, studying at a university in Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Student counsellor at a university in Shanghai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Highest Education Level</td>
<td>Current Position</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Accountant at a department store in Guangzhou</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Xiakuan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>Bank clerk in Shenzhen</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Xiaomeng</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Product manager at a state-owned enterprise in Shenzhen</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Xiaoyu</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Chinese teacher at a primary school in Ningbo (a city in eastern China)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Xihe</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>Master</td>
<td>Works at an educational company in Beijing</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Xianyu</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
<td>a sophomore at a university in the city of Jinan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Xuexin</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>General secretary at a department store in Guangzhou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Xujian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Postgraduate student from Shenzhen, studying in Hong Kong for master’s degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Yanyu</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>TV journalist in a county in Dongguan (a city in Guangdong province in southern China)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Zeqin</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>Public relations manager at an advertising company in Shenzhen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Zhangguai</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Entrepreneur who runs a media studio in Beijing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Zhuotu</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Editor of a government website in Guangdong province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Zixun</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>PhD candidate at a university in Guangzhou</td>
</tr>
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Author/s:
Fu, Jun

Title:
A study of online citizenship practices of Chinese young people

Date:
2017

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