Contentious Collective Action in China:
The Mobilizing Structure of *Weixin*-Mediated Networks

by

Cindy Tse
B.A., University of Toronto, 2007

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Political Science

Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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In 2007 the number of acts of popular resistance in China reached 240 per day, ranging in size and severity from small, public "strolls" to massive, violent demonstrations. Such high levels of contention in an authoritarian regime resistant to political reform is unique, but what is more perplexing is the unorganized nature of this contention. Even without a robust civil society supported by autonomous social organizations, occurrences of contentious collective action continue to rise. Instead, it is networks that are at work here. This thesis will explore contentious politics in China and the role of digitally mediated social networks as mobilizing structures for contentious collective action. Drawing on a case study of a group of sixteen high school students in Beijing, this research analyzes their use of *Weixin*, a multi-functional instant messaging platform, to develop and maintain their social networks, and how the changes to their networks of strong and weak ties may be conducive to mobilization of contention. This study also explores the potential for this communication platform to become a robust counterpublic sphere in which its 355 million users can feel free to express themselves.

The findings of this research demonstrate that most users believe *Weixin* to be a private communication space, populated by trusted ties, with whom they feel free to express themselves. However, suspicions of state surveillance and incidents of censorship have had an impact for wary users. While networks mediated by *Weixin* are primarily virtual extension of real intermittent networks, users have found this platform to have an impact on increasing their strong ties, and building trust in their relationships. In times of crisis, and in the final decision-shaping process of mobilization, it is these strong ties that make networks so valuable. However, the respondents do not show a great propensity to use *Weixin* to build a more heterogeneous network that affords them access to a broader range of social groups and information, a necessary precondition for the socialization function of networks in mobilizing contentious collective action.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my family first and foremost, not only for providing their love and support throughout this process, but for always being part of my interest in China and our roots. So many of my experiences in "returning" to China, a place where I no longer have kinship ties, have been with my partner, James. Thank you for being my family in China, and for helping me discover my place there.

Despite the many months spent toiling over this project in solitude, there are many people I can thank for ensuring that I did not have to go it alone, and that I had the support, resources, and encouragement that made its completion possible. First, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Guoguang Wu. Your words of advice, often nestled in humorous anecdotes, were always thought-provoking and helpful. Thank you for your patience in giving me time and freedom to ruminate over ideas and explore the multiple directions this project meandered in before settling on one. The knowledge and experiences you shared were an invaluable resource. To Dr. Colin Bennett, I must say that few teachers in my experience have shown such care in his students' learning. Thank you for the guidance you offered so generously and the knowledge you imparted so readily. I always left our discussions with more insights and direction than I knew what to do with. I am also grateful to my graduate professors, Dr. Marlea Clarke and Dr. Michelle Bonner for sharing their expertise and ensuring that our seminars were fruitful experiences.

To my peers in the Political Science Department at the University of Victoria, I must thank you not only for making this past year a joyful experience, but for exposing me to your own intellectual interests and passions. Because of all of you, I will leave Victoria feeling it was a city full of wonderfully humorous and intelligent people.

To my friend Amy, I cannot thank you enough for your work in making this project possible. And to the participants in this study, I am forever grateful for your candid and thoughtful contributions. Congratulations on your graduation, I hope that all of you achieve your goals as you embark on this next chapter in your lives.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Chun Yee, for making sure that I knew where I came from, and for giving me the freedom to return there.

INTRODUCTION

> *"The Taiwan-funded Xianglu Group has begun building a PX plant. It's like an atomic bomb in Xiamen. Many people will suffer leukemia and more babies will be born with congenital defects. A paraxylene project should be at least 100 kilometers from a major urban settlement, but we are only 16 km from the project. For the sake of our future generations, please forward the message to all your friends!"*

The above is an SMS (Short Messaging Service) text message that was sent to millions of residents of Xiamen on the southeastern coast of China in the summer of 2007. This relatively small coastal city of three and a half million, renowned in China for its clean environment and liveability, was taken over by protest activities in opposition to a planned paraxylene plant, estimated to generate annual revenues of 80 billion Chinese yuan (10.4 billion USD). The text message was shared widely among Xiamen residents, and coalesced in a large-scale, public "stroll"[1] through the city demanding public consultation on the project. From among the 10,000 participants, many reported receiving multiple messages about the paraxylene plant and the protest event from multiple friends, as well as unknown senders.[2] Participants who were former residents of Xiamen who had relocated or were studying elsewhere when they received the message also reported that local Xiamen contacts had sent them the news of the event via SMS text. The message that reached millions was eventually posted on the Internet, and mass media were later engaged in covering the event. However, its transmission from friends via mobile phones was the primary point of contact for participants in the stroll, not the Internet or mass media, which provided little support in mobilizing participants (Huang and Yip 2012, 219; Liu 2013, 1012). The project was eventually relocated further from urban areas in the province following a public hearing and a vote involving 107 randomly selected representatives from among Xiamen residents.

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[1] Interestingly, the politically neutral word "stroll" is used to refer to events that are ostensibly demonstrations.

The interaction between contentious collective action, interpersonal networks and mediated communication in China is neatly represented in the above case. Ordinary citizens became engaged in collective action through their interpersonal networks, emboldened by suspicions of official misconduct, reclaiming public space as a last resort to resist both corporate and state interests. Such acts of popular resistance are no longer rare occurrences in China today. According to official reports, the number of acts of collective resistance increased tenfold from 8,700 in 1995 to 87,000 in 2007, which includes incidents ranging from brief disruptive acts to the less common "mass incidents" (*quntixing shijian*), and in rare cases, escalating to what the Chinese government classifies as "social unrest" (Cai 2008, 163). Disruptive action is fairly commonplace today, emerging in the form of protests, sit-ins, office or road blockades, and can involve confrontation with state actors or police, while more serious "social unrest" is defined by the Ministry of Public Security to include any collective resistance that directly violates laws or regulations, disrupts social order, threatens public or individual security, or damages public property (163). Certainly, none of these events can be said to constitute a social movement of any sort. The limited nature of collective resistance in China has been described by Ho and Edmonds (2008) as a form of *embedded activism*, that which occurs within a semi-authoritarian context of limited freedom of speech and association, but relatively open spaces for engagement in civic action. This context is simultaneously restrictive of and conducive to collective action, as it lessens the risk of repression for participants and the threat of social instability for the state.

While the surge in acts of collective resistance in China falls short of evidence of social movements, what is remarkable about this anti-paraxylene protest in Xiamen and perhaps many other instances of collective resistance that have occurred since the early 2000s is the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in facilitating these events. Mobile instant messaging and SMS have become commonplace in the daily lives of participants in contentious political acts, as mobile phone usage reached 85% of the total population in China in 2013 (Liu 2014, 15). Microblogs (*weibo*) in particular have been critical in engaging broader audiences in online public discourses surrounding major incidents or issues, and facilitating networks of activists and micro-blog users (Huang and Sun 2013; Tai and Zhang 2013). However, the complex ways in which

information diffusion, communication and sociability have changed through new platforms in ICT, and the implications for mobilization of contentious politics in China have yet to be fully explored.

The popularity and usage patterns of any form of communication are constantly evolving, challenging scholars to keep abreast of changes that can occur in great leaps and bounds. A considerable body of work has emerged that explores the impacts of microblogging on various aspects of social and political life in China since they were first introduced in 2007 (Yip and Jiang 2011; Hassid 2012; Tai and Zhang 2013; Wang 2013). Thus there is quite a lot of support for claims that microblogging has facilitated information diffusion and expanded the networks of users across vast geographical distances. However, in just a few short years, the use of microblogs and desktop instant messaging has fallen behind the staggering growth in mobile instant messaging for a large portion of the population. The China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), an agency of the Ministry of Information Industry, generates bi-annual reports on the state of ICT in China. This is the most comprehensive data available on China's total internet population of 618 million users. CNNIC reported a decrease of 27.83 million microblog users in the last half of 2013, falling to 280.78 million, or 45.5% of Internet users (CNNIC 2014, 40).

The drop in growth of microblog users may also be accompanied by a decline in intensity of activity. Early assessments by media analysts and official Chinese government statistics suggest a decline in the frequency of both microblogging and SNS activity. CNNIC findings show that 23.5% of Internet users report reducing their usage of SNS, and 22.8% have reduced their usage of microblogs. Contrastingly, only 12.7% of users of both SNS and microblogs report increased usage of either (CNNIC 2014, 65). The reasons given for this reduction include shifts to other Internet applications, as 32.6% of those who reduced SNS usage, and 37.5% of those who reduced microblogging usage claim that they shifted to the use of multi-functional mobile instant messaging apps. Furthermore, a private analytics firm Weiboreach reports that well-known and influential microbloggers on China's most popular microblogging service, Sina Weibo, have shown a marked decline in their posting activity. Drawing from a random sample of

4,500 *Weibo*[3] accounts with more than 50,000 followers conducted from January to August 2013, Weiboreach found a 20% drop in aggregate monthly posts (Chin and Mozur 2013).

Meanwhile desktop instant messaging reached 532 million users by the end of 2013 with a utilization rate of 86.1% of all Internet users (CNNIC 2014, 40). More importantly, mobile instant messaging applications have shown the greatest growth rates of all Internet-based applications, even exceeding growth rates and utilization rates for desktop instant messaging. The number of mobile instant messaging users in China reached 431 million by the end of 2013, representing 12-month growth of 78.64 million users. Certainly, there is overlap between microblog users, desktop instant messaging and mobile instant messaging users, as well as exclusive users of each platform.

Looking broadly at China's total Internet user population of 618 million, it is fair to say that the digital divide in China is comparable to that of the developed world, rather than that of the Global South. Internet access is no longer a luxury beyond the reach of most citizens. 47.9% of Internet users have junior high school education levels or lower. And though the urban-rural divide is particularly pronounced in China, with rural users making up only 28.6% of the total Internet population, the proportion of new rural users exceeded new urban users for the first time in June 2010 and has since continued to exceed 50%, reaching 54% of new users in June 2012. There are now 177 million rural Internet users, even as the proportion of China's population living in rural areas continues to decline. More importantly, Internet users are no longer anchored to desktop PCs either, as 81% of all Internet users, and 73.3% of new Internet users access it from a mobile device. There are a total of 500 million mobile Internet users in China today, but the growth has occurred in a very short period of time. In fact, from the end of June 2013 to end of December 2013, 36 million people in China gained access to the Internet via a mobile device. To understand the magnitude of this growth, in a period of six months, a population slightly greater than the total population of Canada began using mobile

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[3] As is common in both mass media and scholarly work on microblogging in China, "*weibo*" with a lower-case "w" will refer to all microblogging services offered in China, while *"Weibo"* with an upper-case "W" will be used to refer to the microblogging service of Sina Corporation, which remains the most popular of all microblogging services offered in China.

Internet in China. All told, China's Internet population today is significantly less educated, less wealthy, more diverse, more mobile, and arguably, more connected than just one decade ago.

Amidst the rapid changes detailed above, scholarship on the impact of this incredible growth in mobile communication technologies on civic engagement or popular resistance in China has not kept pace. Market research firms have been the first to take an interest in mobile instant messaging, generating marketing strategies for private industry to capitalize on opportunities provided by e-payment and location-based functions to target consumers (iResearch 2013). Furthermore, research conducted by Chinese scholars is somewhat limited to the field of education (Wei and Ke 2014; Lai and Mao 2014), and user behaviour and adoption patterns (Lin 2014).

Thesis Statement and Research Questions

This thesis will focus on *Weixin,* a popular multi-functional, mobile instant messaging application in China, and by far the most popular among the many similar options on the market from both domestic and foreign firms. The platform will be studied in the way that it operates as a public or private space of communication, and how its interaction with users' social networks might exhibit potential for facilitating engagement in contentious political activity. In this thesis, I will ask: Do social networks mediated by *Weixin* exhibit characteristics that would facilitate *networked collective action*? I will utilize a network approach, wherein social movements are understood as networks of informal relationships between a multiplicity of individuals and organizations who share a distinctive collective identity and mobilize resources on conflictual issues (Diani 1992; Diani 2000). However, I will argue that given the absence of large-scale social movement organizations (SMOs) and the limited role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in China, interpersonal networks become the most important structures in understanding mobilization.

From a historical perspective, collective action in China has always occurred without a significant role for organizations as brokers or leaders (Zhou 1993), as communal ties and grassroots elites have figured more prominently as mobilizing

structures (Kuang and Göbel 2013; Shi and Cai 2006). However, with the rapid expansion of mobile connectivity for a large and diverse proportion of the Chinese population, digitally mediated social networks operating as organizing agents are the most conducive channel for large-scale digitally networked action in China. Formal organizations may become involved at the periphery, and they may even initiate separate efforts to get an issue on the public agenda, but social networks themselves constitute the driving organizing agent for mobilization of participants. In the empirical portion of this study, I will explore the ways in which *Weixin* influences mediated social networks, and how such changes might contribute to the mobilization of contentious collective action. To that end, I will ask three supporting research questions.

First, does *Weixin's* multi-functional social networking and mobile instant messaging platform reinforce close interpersonal networks of existing ties? To understand this process, I will explore users' attitudes regarding the impact of *Weixin* on the building of trust in their relationships, as well as *Weixin's* effects on the homogeneity of their social network. I will also seek to obtain a snapshot of users' modes of communication with this core group of ties in order to uncover the ways in which the respondents in this study have increased or altered contact with their social networks using *Weixin*. I will also explore their use of multiple layers of communication (face-to-face, one-to-one and group chats, SNS, voice and video calls/messages) in their engagement with these strong ties to understand *Weixin's* role in the complex repertoire of communication tools that bind core networks together. Resource mobilization in illiberal regimes is highly dependent on close ties, as it is integral to recruitment of participants to high-risk collective action, not only in providing the opportunities to mobilize latent participants, but also in the final decision-shaping aspect of participation (Passy 2003; Osa 2003; Liu 2014). Thus, a group of strong ties that form the core of one's network is integral to mobilization of contentious collective action. I will also explore respondents' attitudes towards mediated modes of information sharing and self-expression with close ties on *Weixin*, and whether or not close ties affect self-expression on *Weixin* by either facilitating or constraining it.

Another supporting supplementary question asked in this study is whether or not *Weixin* contributes to an expanded network of heterogeneous weak ties. A network of more diverse, but less intimately familiar connections can enable users to share personalized issue frames, supports resource-seeking (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 758), socializes individuals in particular issues (Passy 2003, 24), and can provide readily available organizing capacity, knowledge, information (Granovetter 1973), and material resources. While most American studies of SNS usage have found a positive relationship between the use of SNS and larger networks of weak, heterogeneous ties, I will seek to explore how the multi-functional platform of *Weixin* with its integrated social networking function is used in the same way to foster weak ties within one's network.

Lastly, I will ask if *Weixin* is perceived to be a private communication space that affords individuals relative freedom from self-censorship and state surveillance. Such a space would offer users greater control in determining how far one's self-expressions are "broadcast," and could contribute to the creation of counterhegemonic public spheres where users can challenge dominant discourses and cultivate contentious conversation within a flexible network.

Weixin, Mediating and Privatizing Communication

Weixin (meaning "micro message") is a mobile social messaging application launched in 2011 by one of the largest internet services companies in the country, Tencent Holdings Ltd, which also runs the largest desktop instant messaging site, QQ, and a popular microblogging site, Tencent Weibo, a competitor of Sina Weibo. In just three years, the social messaging app (combined with its overseas version, *WeChat*) has accumulated 355 million active users[4] and 2 million "public accounts," which allow businesses, media outlets and individuals to share articles, promotions, and various other messages to a set

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[4] Tencent Corp. defines monthly active users (MAU) of *Weixin* and *WeChat* as the total number of user accounts that sent out one or more messages via *Weixin*/WeChat or conducted other proactive operations on *Weixin*/WeChat, such as logging into Game Center or updating Moments, at least once during the last calendar month prior to the relevant date (a defition that reflects its multiple functions). However, the participant group used in this study is comprised of highly active *Weixin* users, all of whom use *Weixin* several times a week, with a majority using it several times an hour.

of followers through an interactive newsfeed that appears much like the application's text-based chats (Wertime 2014; PR Newswire 2014).

In just three short years, the application has evolved into a unique multi-functional platform, incorporating various features beyond its chat function, which allows up to forty users in one conversation (a special request is required to add more users). The additional features make the application difficult to categorize in terms of the current web typology. The application now includes a social networking section called "Moments" (similar to a Facebook profile), a game centre, e-payment function, voice chat messaging, live phone calls, video-chat, video calls, and location-based services such as randomized user searches (its "shake" function), and a function called "drift", that allows users to send a "message in a bottle" into cyberspace for any user to open (with optional anonymity). While the network is closed to those users added to one's *Weixin* addressbook, the various functions range in degree of "privateness" of interactions. Location-based functions allow users to make new connections with other nearby users, offering the capability to extend one's *Weixin* contacts beyond one's own network of known connections. However, one's list of contacts is not searchable by friends, and interactions on the social networking "Moments" tab are only visible if users are common contacts. Thus, the social networking aspects of *Weixin* cannot be neatly categorized as a contemporary social network site, which should incorporate a profile, public testimonials or comments, and a traversable list of friends (Boyd 2007, 4).

Although *Weixin* is suspected to be subject to the same mechanisms of state surveillance as blogs, microblogs and bulletin boards (BBS) that allow for messages to be censored on the server side by the hosting company according to keyword lists (Citizen Lab 2013; Crandall et al. 2013), the closed nature of networks in this medium renders it less of a threat to state interests. Chat messages and SNS posts are shared with their own network of *Weixin* contacts, are not searchable on *Weixin* or through Internet search engines[5], and are thus spread much more slowly than communications through microblogs or chat forums. This limits the impact of negative posts and provides

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[5] Users can chose to allow their *Weixin* Moments posts to be visible to all other users.

authorities with much more time to act on perceived threats. Preliminary research on censorship and surveillance on other instant messaging platforms in China suggest that a different strategy is being employed here than on public platforms such as microblogs and SNS[6]. Nonetheless, the mechanisms of control are not the focus of this thesis, rather it is whether users *perceive Weixin* to be a private space for open discussion that is of particular relevance to this research topic, and how this might alter their behaviour on this platform. Attitudes towards both state control and privacy will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Public vs Private Communication in Mediated Public Space

The various functions of *Weixin's* multi-platform instant messaging application can be crudely categorized according to Diani's (2000) typology of four types of computer-mediated communication (CMC), which draws upon two dichotomous distinctions. The first is a public/private distinction in terms of accessibility by third parties. The second is a direct/mediated distinction, which depends on the element of face-to-face interaction. This brings us to four types of CMC: public and direct, private and direct, public and mediated, and private and mediated. While other forms of social networking such as blogs and microblogs are a public and mediated form of communication (visible to all, not face-to-face), *Weixin* is to some extent a private and mediated form of communication (communication is designed to reach a specified audience, though the message may become known to unintended audience). Private and direct communication is understood to be the conventional forms of face-to-face in which information is only intended for a bounded audience. Public and direct communication primarily occurs in public (or semi-public) space where messages can take the form of posters, distributed pamphlets, and banners. While we can categorize *Weixin* as a private and mediated form of CMC using this typology, the subsequent functions added to it beyond its initial

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[6] See Crandall et al. (2013) for an interesting comparative study of censorship and surveillance practices on TOM-Skype and Sina UC (two other popular instant messaging applications). Findings regarding the lack of overlap between the two companies' keyword lists are particularly interesting, as they indicate that different Internet companies exercise considerable autonomy in the compilation of the keyword lists used by their internal censors. While not determined definitively in this study, the researchers suggest that instant messaging control strategies may be oriented towards surveillance of individual users rather than censorship of broader discourses.

design as a private chat application, and the individual agency involved in how it has come to be used by its 355 million users, make this categorization only an approximation based on its intended affordances. The user's sense of privacy, the structure of control, and the practices of self-surveillance on this platform will be explored further in a discussion of the empirical findings of this study in Chapter 4.

In order to contextualize the description of *Weixin* as a private space, the distinction between public and private mediated spaces needs to be clarified, and perhaps reinterpreted in being applied to *Wexin*. Understanding how perceptions of public and private operate in mediated spaces can contribute to a better understanding of the behaviour of users. Boyd (2010) points to a better way to evaluate the "public-ness" of any space beyond a dichotomy of public-private:

> It is difficult to define public or private without referring to the other. Often, especially in tech circles, these terms are seen as two peas in a binary pod. More flexible definitions allow the two terms to sit at opposite ends of an axis, giving us the ability to judge just how public or private a particular event or place is. Unfortunately, even this scale is ill equipped to handle the disruption of mediating technology. What it means to be public or private is quickly changing before our eyes and we lack the language, social norms, and structures to handle it. (1)

Defining *Weixin* in terms of public and private is exceedingly difficult. What might be categorized as distinctly private, such as private group chats on *Weixin*, is still public to the extent that circles are extended beyond face-to-face interactions in the real world and somewhat meet the criteria of Boyd's definition of a *mediated publics* (environments where people can gather publicly through mediating technology): namely (1) *persistence,* a record of what you say remains long after you have said it, (2) *searchability,* conversations and postings can be saved and filtered through (3) *replicability*, parts of conversations can be copied and transferred to others and are imbued with more legitimacy than what is heard on the conventional grapevine, and (4) *invisible audiences*, we cannot see who "overhears" our conversations, which is facilitated by the preceding three characteristics. While these criteria do not enable neat distinctions between private and public in today's rapidly evolving ICT, they are highly useful in gaining an

understanding of the dynamics of any new ICT, as Boyd argues that their variations in these four criteria "fundamentally alter social dynamics, complicating the ways in which people interact." (Boyd 2010, 2)

The audience users imagine in *Weixin* is perhaps what separates this communication space from the public space of prior social networking sites, blogs, and microblogs, raising questions about how a more defined audience might influence behaviour on such a platform. Boyd (2010) explains the importance of a defined audience in public space:

> At a first pass, it's challenging to interpret context in a mediated space… The lack of context is precisely why the imagined audience of Friends is key. It is impossible to speak to all people across all space and all time. It's much easier to imagine who you are speaking to and direct your energies towards them, even if your actual audience is quite different. (Boyd 2010, 3)

The mediated space of *Weixin* is relatively closed compared to that of a BBS, microblog, or public SNS, and the audience easier to imagine with norms either reflecting the real world relationships of the group itself (old schoolmates, parents of students at a particular school, etc). How the imagined audience of a closed *Weixin* group shapes it as a private space of discussion and deliberation of public affairs certainly differs from the public space of an open microblog. However, the imagined audience can both constrain and limit expression for users, a matter which will be discussed in the empirical findings in Chapter 3. Nonetheless, if *Weixin* can be characterized as a private space, we can begin to ask whether or not the sense of privacy in this mediated space might be conducive to freedom of expression, which is integral to mobilization of contentious collective action.

"Remediation": The shift from *Weibo* to *Weixin*

In exploring the popular uses of *Weixin*, the platform will be examined in the way it "remediates" prior forms of communication technology (telephone, personal computers), visual media (television, film, visual arts) and social spaces (mediated and unmediated, parks, cities, dinner tables, online chatrooms). Remediation can be understood as "the formal logic by which new media technologies refashion prior media forms […] and is a

defining characteristic of the new digital media." (Bolter and Grusin 1999 in Tai 2006, 164) According to Tai (2006), "every new digital medium pays homage to, and re-represents its predecessor; computer networks, however, have the power to remediate all previous media forms into one platform." Thus, we see in the development of *Weixin's* various functions (text and image-based messaging, group messaging, voice messages, video calls, news and personal photo feed, messages set adrift in cyberspace in the "drift" function) a remediation of not only the preceding social media platforms of the digital age, but of all communication tools of modern civilization, and the historically and culturally rooted practices of social interaction in the real world.

Remediation is a perpetual process that challenges scholarship on networked publics. Benkler (2006) describes this challenge in saying:

> Analyzing the effect of the networked information environment on public discourse by cataloging the currently popular tools for communication is, to some extent, self-defeating. These will undoubtedly be supplanted by new ones. Analyzing this effect without having a sense of what these tools are or how they are being used is, on the other hand, impossible. This leaves us with the need to catalog what is, while trying to abstract from what is being used to what relationships of information and communication are emerging, and from these to transpose to a theory of the networked information economy as a new platform for the public sphere. (215)

In the case of non-democratic states with controlled media environments, Benkler's argument has even more bearing. Explorations of the either emancipatory and utopian, or constraining and dystopian effects of the ICT in China and elsewhere cannot proceed without first achieving an understanding of how new platforms of communication operate as public spaces, how they sustain new or existing relationships, and how information interacts with these new forms of sociability to engage individuals in contentious politics. Implicit in these questions is the widely shared understanding by media scholars that the "potential and dynamic usages [of ICT] cannot be managed as though they might be manipulated into a pre-ordained set of practise and outcomes." (Donald et. al 2010, 6) Thus, while ICT progress through technological advancements and innovative user interfaces, the ways in which they are ultimately used can be unpredictable and unintended.

Methodology

The last two decades of media studies in China have led to diverse methodological approaches to studying China, not only in the way scholars have approached the case of China, but also in the particular techniques and methods they have employed. Taken together, scholars have begun to approach communication and media in China not just as institutions, texts, and tools but as practices that affect and order social life (Yu 2011, 69). Similarly, I have sought to approach *Weixin* not just as a tool that serves instrumental purposes, but to design a questionnaire that could explore how communication is practiced through *Weixin* in the daily lives of a group of avid users, and how it has become incorporated into their existing social terrain and communication practices.

This project employs an exploratory approach through a single case study. Yin (2014, 16) defines a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context. The "case" in this project is a group of high school students' use of *Weixin* within their social networks. What I seek to achieve is not the confirmation of a particular theory, but to explore the perceptions and intentions of users of multi-functional mobile instant messaging platforms and changes to their social networks. I also seek to uncover what respondents perceive to be hindrances to their self-expression and sense of privacy in this mediated communication space. The findings of this study then should indicate whether or not there is sufficient indication that there exists a relationship between *Weixin* use and changes in the aforementioned attitudes and social networks, which should justify further inquiry into the specific factors I investigate. A case study is appropriate in such exploratory exercises where variables of interest exceed possible data points, and where the research objective is not generalizability to a broader population (all *Weixin* users) or even a more proximate subset (young, urban, middle class *Weixin* users). Instead, a case study is appropriate where the objective is to develop theoretical propositions that have thus far not been empirically explored in China, given the rather sudden emergence of *Weixin* specifically,

and the dearth of empirical study of social networking in China more generally. Again, Yin (2014, 21) provides a succinct description of the virtue of case studies:

> […] case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes. In this sense, the case study, like the experiment, does not represent a "sample," and in doing case study research, your goal will be to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalizations) and not to extrapolate probabilities (statistical generalizations).

Accordingly, this research aims to contribute to the development of theories on social networks and contentious politics in a newly developing context of how interpersonal communication is practiced. There is as yet little to no empirical research on the impact of *Weixin* on social networks in China, and how any effects might contribute to popular resistance. Thus, my research and choice of a case study constitutes an effort to know whether existing theoretical propositions on ICT's impacts on communication and social networks have wider resonance in this context (Henn 2013, 182).

A web-based, self-administered questionnaire with a combination of 30 closed and open-ended questions was used to explore the sample group's usage patterns with *Weixin*, rendering a snapshot of how this platform has been integrated into their communication patterns within their social networks. Admittedly, this method is typically not ideal in case study approaches, as surveys are not well-suited for exploring phenomena within their contexts, and answering "why" type research questions (Yin 2014, 16). The boundaries of a phenomenon and its context are described by Yin in his widely-used definition as difficult to discern, rendering methods such as experimental methods (which separate a phenomenon from its context) and surveys inappropriate. However, the survey employed in this project was limited to research questions of a "how" and "what" type, which can be effectively explored through surveys within case studies.

The survey was then analyzed and semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with a subset of five students. Four were conducted in pairs (by their request), and one was conducted individually. It was through these interviews that I was able to

begin exploring the "why" type questions related to the usage patterns of these particular respondents.

A purposive sample of a group of active *Weixin* users was chosen, with access granted by a former classmate of mine who is now a high school teacher in Beijing. My contact permitted me to invite a group of her senior students to participate in this study. They are all 18 years old, and are enrolled in the same high school science class. As the study is an exploratory endeavour of a very new communication tool that has yet to undergo significant empirical investigation, a purposive sampling method of an extreme case was chosen in order to focus on a "pure" or clear-cut instance of the phenomenon of interest (Given 2008, 697). A demographically homogenous group with a very high level of activity on *Weixin* allows for an amplified view of the potential effects of this platform on social networks, and its resonance with broader theoretical propositions. Again, as in most case study designs, this sample does not represent a larger population that can allow for subsequent statistical inferences about such a population. Rather, a purposive sample of an extreme case reflects the objective of this research to explore a particular phenomenon empirically in order to generalize such findings to a broader theory (Yin 1994, 36).

Data collection through the online questionnaire was conducted over the course of two weeks. The original survey can be found in Appendix A. Twenty students were invited to participate and seventeen accepted the request. One response was removed from the study, as it was reasonable to assume based on the respondent's answers to a number of questions that the contribution as not a serious one. In total, there were seven men and nine women surveyed. They spent between 22 to 44 minutes on the survey, according to the data provided by the survey hosting site (Survey Monkey). Interviews were conducted in Beijing approximately two months after the questionnaire was completed, and lasted approximately an hour and a half each.

The respondents in this study were in the final months of their high school education at the time they completed the questionnaire in this study. They attend a private high school in Beijing that follows the Nova Scotia curriculum and is taught in

English. They are destined for post-secondary education abroad, as none of the students has taken the Chinese state university entrance exam. This particular group presents an appropriate sample for this study as one that is arguably more open to discussing this research topic, which is considered to be politically sensitive. Educational institutions are situated in a critical position in the Chinese state's machinery of social control, particularly China's system of 2,358 universities (Yan 2014, 1). However, being foreign-funded and privately owned, while also not following the Chinese state curriculum, this particular school is less restrictive of its students' behaviour, lifestyles, and self-expression, giving me reason to believe that the respondents were not compelled by school authorities to represent a particular point of view or to intentionally conceal their true beliefs.

While this study of social networks mediated by *Weixin* is situated in literature on the impact of ICT on contentious politics, it does not seek to measure or prove a relationship between *Weixin* use and collective action or collective behaviour. A series of Likert-type questions were used to gauge respondents' attitudes towards how *Weixin* affects their relationships, and their communication behaviour using this application. The results were not used in variable analysis, as such a method is not well-suited to the communication practices of today's tethered youth. The multiple modes of communication that the respondents in this study have at their disposal to choose from and engage in simultaneously are so ubiquitous and integrated that identifying strictly causal relationships would be an intractable and fruitless endeavour (Bimber et al. 2012, 12). Furthermore, this research concerns the effect of a particular technological tool on one's networks of ties, and as such, it is their own self-assessments of their communication practices and networks that is of particular value and relevance in this study. For that reason, questions regarding the respondents' agreement with particular statements using Likert-type scales and free-form answers were intended to allow respondents to interpret the changes in their network for themselves, rather than to design survey questions that would allow the researcher to measure the size, quality and dynamics of their networks. A particular ontological understanding of the subjects of this study is at work here. In designing this questionnaire and analyzing its results, I tried to be mindful of the words of Moses and Knutsen (2012, 148):

> For many observers, the natural and social worlds are inherently different, and this difference is obvious: people, unlike particles, *think.* The subjects of social studies are self-aware, reflexive, creative and intentional: they rationalize their actions; they are motivated by purpose; and they enjoy a certain freedom of action.

What I sought to uncover in this questionnaire and through interviews was their intentions in their uses of *Weixin*, their purposes in sharing or consuming information and personal details with their networks, and their rationalizations for (not) expressing themselves openly with their network on this digital platform. To that end, approaching my respondents' contributions as those of self-aware and reflexive actors was imperative.

Thesis Outline

This thesis will continue in Chapter Two with a thorough explication of the key theoretical and conceptual foundations of contentious politics and their application to the study of China. I will trace the development of the resource mobilization framework and the ways in which structuralist, rationalist and interpretative assumptions can be integrated within this framework to understand the process of mobilization through three functions of networks (Passy 2003). Resource mobilization will be contrasted with alternative frameworks in the study of contentious politics, which include the political opportunities/political process model, and a network approach in which I will question the role of organizations in mobilizing collective action. This will be followed by a literature review in Chapter Two of the most relevant scholarship on contention in China, categorized according to the aforementioned frameworks. Chapters 3 and 4 are a summary and discussion of the empirical findings of this study, focused on three aspects of private, mediated communication in *Weixin*. Chapter 3 will discuss the integration of mass and interpersonal communications and the changes in both strong and weak network ties as predictors of bridging and bonding social capital. Chapter 4 will then explore the sense of privacy experienced by *Weixin* users, and will discuss the platform's potential as an open space for self-expression. Considerations of privacy and state surveillance of interactions with one's network on *Weixin* is explored here. The final chapter will look broadly at the unique state of "contentious authoritarianism" in China

today, and consider the broader implications of mediated networks within an expanded communication space for resistance.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework, Concepts, and Literature Review

Defining Contentious Politics

Contentious politics is understood to be confrontational action taken by ordinary people in concert with others, who may be more influential or powerful, against elites, authorities, or any type of opponent (Tarrow 2011, 6). Claims are made that bear on others' interests, and governments become involved as receivers, initiators, or third parties to such claims (Tilly 2008, 5). Sustained contentious politics can lead to the social movements, rebellions, and revolutions that scholars of contentious politics have explored throughout the industrialized West, Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia. However, this thesis will focus on the most elementary building block of contentious politics – that of contentious collective action.

Collective action can come in non-political and non-contentious forms when ordinary people engage in any number of innocuous activities. Participating in a futsal league, organizing or participating in a marriage market (as is often seen in urban China's parks), submitting a petition with neighbours to a local authority about a private complaint, these actions are collective. They also exhibit positive externalities related to the exchange of bridging social capital (Putnam 2000). Collective action moves from the realm of the ordinary to that of the contentious when it is taken up by those "who lack regular access to representative institutions, who act in the name of new or unaccepted claims, and who behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities" (Tarrow 2011, 7). Thus, a collective petition that challenges an authority's power, questions the legality of an opponent's actions, or seeks to change established practices moves into the realm of contention.

Overtly violent or disruptive acts make it easy to identify contentious collective action, but the concept must be contextualized in China's unique social and political milieux. Disruption commonly characterizes much contentious collective action around the world, though analyzing contention in repressive regimes such as China requires a finer lens that is tuned to the collective purpose and meaning that is represented in words, dress, identification of and reappropriation of symbols, and may appear to be less direct

acts of resistance. Defining contentious politics must also reflect the particular legal and administrative practices of a given place. Contentious collective action is broadly understood to exclude legally-sanctioned acts, which can vary from one jurisdiction to the next. In the case of China, legitimate forms of collective action involving the courts, arbitration committees and complaint systems such as the various "letters and visits" (*xinfang zhidu)* systems throughout the PRC would not constitute contentious political acts. However, contentious politics can emerge from claims made initially through formal institutions of the state, such as a collective complaint to a municipal level government that escalates into a public protest, or an unsatisfactory arbitration committee ruling that gets taken up by legal activists and intellectuals in an open letter to a given state body, and leads to a public demonstration demanding some form of redress. For our purposes, it is the escalation to a "last resort," a disruptive act, or what Xi Chen (2012, 12) describes as "trouble-making tactics" (demonstrations, sit-ins, road blockades) that are considered to constitute contentious politics in China.

The vast and growing body of work on contention in various contexts around the globe can be neatly distinguished by its use of one of three theoretical frameworks in contentious politics that focus on political opportunities, resource mobilization, and collective frames. Whether the unit of analysis has been at the level of the individual, group, or institution, the structural analysis of political and economic opportunities has proven to be the dominant framework, not only in providing an account for the mobilization process, but also the outcomes of collective actions. The following section will provide a broad overview of this framework before explicating the main tenets of an alternative framework that is utilized in this thesis, that of resource mobilization. This framework will be considered in light of new theoretical propositions that place networks at the center of the analysis rather than individuals and organizations operating under a conventional logic of collective action. These two contending theoretical frameworks will structure the subsequent literature review on contentious politics in China, and the salience of networks and ICT in contemporary analyses of the mobilization process.

The Dominant Framework: Political Opportunities and Leadership

While this thesis is focused on the horizontal organization of interpersonal networks as a mobilizing structure, the outcome of such actions is highly dependent on vertical interactions between networks of contentious individuals and state actors. These constitute external factors that can create or close windows of opportunity for contentious claims-making. For much of the 1970s and 1980s, informal grassroots activity was the particular interest of proponents of an emerging "political process model" in the study of contentious politics. Workplaces, neighbourhoods, churches, and colleges were the breeding grounds of collective action in this model, structuring and facilitating organization, recruitment, and activism (McAdam et. al 1996, 4). Such factors speak to the still highly relevant literature on the political process model that began with American political scientists who took a distinctly political approach to studying social movements beginning with the American Civil Rights movement (Tarrow 2011, 26).

It is Charles Tilly's foundational work *From Mobilization to Revolution* that much of the scholarship on the "political opportunity structures" of social movements revolves around. In this model, mobilization of collective action depends on opportunities for and threats to challengers, as well as corresponding facilitation or repression by opposition/authorities. More importantly, Tilly's distinctly Marxian analysis of collective action takes conflict as its empirical focus, and finds in the broader structural changes of urbanization, industrialization, state-making and the spread of capitalism the significant impetus for shifts in patterns of collective action and the particular repertoires of protest forms (Tilly 1978, 50). Thus, the broader structural context of any movement was seen as the force driving and structuring the emergence of social movements.

Studies developed throughout the 1980s and 1990s to look at various movements in their unique political and historical contexts, and culminated in McAdam's (1999) "political process model" in *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*. His analysis of black churches, black colleges and the Southern chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) led him to conclude that

these organizations were able to not only mobilize protest, but to create a powerful, shared belief in the movement's political efficacy, and coincided with the migration of significant numbers of the black population from Southern states to electorally significant states in the North, creating a political opportunity for insurgency.

An Alternative Framework: Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT)

Alongside the dominant structural framework of political opportunities, a contending framework developed that focused on the more proximate causal factors that facilitated mobilization of collective action, that of resource mobilization theory. Although this thesis focuses on resource mobilization through networks that make contentious collective action possible, this proposition is not to be confused with the rational choice assumptions of studies of resource mobilization in social movements since the 1970s and shortly afterward, heavily influenced as they were by the dominance of economics in the social sciences, and more specifically by collective action theory, as it was first posited by Mancur Olsen (1971). McCarthy and Zald (1977) led the way in the study of professional social movement organizations (SMO) as central to addressing classic collective action problems in the literature on the burgeoning resource mobilization theory (RMT). However, contentious collective action is approached in this thesis not as a problem of incentivizing participation for individuals who are motivated by narrow self-interests and logically pre-disposed to free-riding. Rather, the focus on resource mobilization in this thesis is on mediated social networks as an organizing agent for collective action, and how *Weixin* can contribute to networks that act as mobilizing structures for the participants, knowledge, and material resources that contentious collective actions require.

The concept of mobilizing structures through which groups organize social movements has been explored and developed by McAdam, McCarthy and Zald (1996, 3) and defined as "those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action." The bulk of RMT literature in contentious politics is primarily concerned with formal organizations and the salience of professional SMOs in sustaining collective claims and building social movements, so

much so that social movements came to be redefined under a new form of "professional social movement," driven by the SMOs they created (McAdam et al. 1996, 4). This literature concludes from grand events such as the American Civil Rights movement and the French Revolution that social movements that appropriate existing organizations such as black churches in the case of the former, and provincial Parliaments in the case of the latter, find greater probability of success than those that mobilize around newly created organizations or networks (Tarrow 2011, 31). Concerned as they were with this meso-level of analysis, the broader structures relevant to the political opportunities framework were left out of this analysis. Furthermore, RMT rests upon Olsen's (1971) logic of collective action, and the importance of resource-rich organizations in coercing and incentivizing participation in contentious collective action. However, recent scholarship on the relevance of collective action theory in a context of modern ICT has challenged major assumptions of this paradigm in light of the lower entry costs for contribution to the public good and the absence of formal organizations in more contemporary incidents of popular uprisings (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Bimber et al. 2005).

This thesis will adopt a network approach to mobilization in collective action, exploring the less formal structures of social networks, and more specifically, digitally mediated social networks. Since the 1990s, scholarship on the importance of social networks in mobilizing and sustaining collective action has gained in importance, even more so with rapid changes in mass media, social networking, communication technologies, and interactions between these three factors. Research within various area studies in comparative politics has contributed to the development of a rich literature that draws from different, though not incompatible, approaches to resource mobilization – structuralist, rationalist and interpretative approaches. Different assumptions about human agency, rational behaviour and the construction of meaning defines each of these approaches. The following discussion of the specific function of networks will demonstrate that the virtue of a network approach to mobilization is its incorporation of these three contending assumptions about behaviour. However, where the approach falters is in the assumption of formal organizations as the driving organizational agent, an assumption that must be reconsidered in the case of China.

Networked Mobilization: Agency, Structure, and Culture

The relationship between social networks, values, identities, political opportunities and collective behaviour can be bridged through the competing approaches to the study of social movements. *Rationalist* scholars understand decisions to participate in collective action in strictly instrumental terms, with human agency at the core of the analysis. The *structuralist* approach emphasizes recruitment through existing social ties, the emergence of resistance in public social spaces, and the spread of movements along existing lines of interaction (Diani and McAdams 2003, 17). However, McAdam (2003) argues that such an approach is limited when it does not make space for cultural context in its analysis. An *interpretive* approach combines structuralist research designs with cultural and historical influences, leading to a more contextualized understanding of the link between networks and participation in collective action and social movements.

How these three approaches can be bridged is to conceptualize participation as a more complicated process than a single decision. Passy (2003, 22) argues that the competing approaches merely describe different stages in a complex process that individuals experience in deciding to participate in collective action. The stages of this process can be understood through Passy's (2003) three functions of social networks: the socialization function, structural-connection function, and decision-shaping function.

The *socialization function* of social networks operates on the level of identity-formation, where networks come into play early on in the participation process to create a predisposition to participate. It is in this early stage that individuals encounter, learn, and adopt new cultural and cognitive frames through interactions with others in a network, enabling them to redefine their own social reality in relation to a given issue and its associated solutions or a plan of action. In this process, integration into a network facilitates a process of personal identification with a particular issue (24).

The second function of networks, the *structural-connection function*, follows the socialization process but precedes the decision to participate in contentious collective action. Once individuals have come to identify with an issue or cause, their predisposition to participate must be converted to action by an opportunity, usually in the

form of a protest or campaign. The mobilizing structure between such latent participants and opportunities to participate can be provided by professional social movement organizations, civic organizations, mass media, and interpersonal networks.

The third function of networks, the *decision-shaping function*, addresses one's perception of the cost factors that act as further impediments to participation. Factors include personal risk, perceived effectiveness of action, probability of satisfactory government action to remedy the problem, and one's personal availability to participate. This decision-shaping function combines rationalist decision-making models with interpretative social interactions, into an assumption that decisions to participate by rational and self-interested actors are shaped by constantly changing perceptions of one's own social position and their interaction with a network of other actors.

A Network Approach beyond Organizations

While I can appreciate Passy's argument in support of pluralism in the different approaches, even this network approach ultimately associates the process of mobilization with participation in *formal organizations* (in Passy's study, the Bern Declaration and the World Wildlife Fund). Relationships and social networks matter, but only insofar as they facilitate recruitment to organizations that are the key actors in creating and sustain movements. Diani (2000) concludes as well that CMC only contribute to social movements instrumentally by mobilizing various types of networks (community networks, virtual extensions of intermittent communities, and entirely virtual communities) to contribute resources to formal organizations. What if there are ultimately few, if any, autonomous, professional social organizations to aggregate the interests of these networks and mobilize collective claim-making, as is the case in China? The network approach needs to be reconsidered in such a context.

The network approach taken in this thesis is both conceptual and methodological, as it requires not only a redefining of concepts and assumptions, but also raises new questions about the relationship between individuals, their networks, and their form of

participation. With social networks as the starting point of the analysis, social movements become understood as networks of informal relationships between a multiplicity of individuals who share a distinctive collective identity and mobilize resources on conflictual issues (Diani 1992; Diani 2000). What needs further explication however is the logic of behaviour that looks beyond networks and *organizations*, and focuses on networks and *organizing* (Bimber et al. 2012, 12)

Collective versus Connective Action

Taking a network approach can certainly shed much light on the stages and channels through which individuals come to be engaged in contentious collective action, and the form that participation takes. However, studies of ICT and contentious politics today must also consider how networked social movements might be exhibiting an entirely new form of contention that does not rely on organizations or on a logic of collective action. We must seek to uncover the ways in which mediated and unmediated communication repertoires exhibit organizing capacity, and how these affect the form of action that is taken. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) posit that digital media have contributed to the personalization of contentious politics in contemporary times, such that a new and unique form of large-scale, *crowd-enabled* protests have come to characterize some of the popular uprisings of 2009 to 2012. These crowd-enabled incidents emerge from a logic of *connective action*, rather than conventional *collective action*. Critics argue that the main tenets of conventional collective action theory – the problem of free-riding and the salience of formal organizations – no longer hold water when we consider the many ways in which individuals have come to use ICT to contribute to a broad, public good (Bimber et al. 2005). Open-source software and Wikipedia are the oft-cited examples of collective action that defies the conventional logic of rational behaviour that requires material incentives or organizational structures to overcome free-riding.

In the Chinese context, unique examples include a phenomenon as old as dial-up Internet in the country – the "human-flesh search engine" (*renrou sousuo)*. Such groups can be broadly understood as collectives of cyber-vigilantes. At their best, human-flesh

search engines have mobilized countless netizens[7] to uncover official corruption or misconduct, and investigate cases of murder that officials have been unable or unwilling to solve.[8] At their worst, these vigilantes have turned angry mobs on unsuspecting individuals in petty accusations that can only be described as cyber-bullying.[9] In such a phenomenon, ICT interact with individual's personal networks, knowledge, and resources to co-produce a public good, often doing the work of state institutions and mass media, and defying the conventional logic of collective action.

In these uses of new media, we can observe a distinctly new culture of routinized sharing of ideas, interests, and connections (Bimber et al. 2012, 5). Instead, Bennett et al. (2014, 234) argue that the new crowd-enabled forms of networked protest begin with self-motivated production (creating, sharing, curating, and integrating content) and personalization of information through "stitching technologies" that bring organization to a broader crowd by connecting networks of networks:

> Communication technologies enable the growth and stabilization of network structures across these [social] networks. Together, the technological agents that enable the constitutive role of sharing in these contexts displace the free-rider calculus and, with it, the dynamic that flows from it – most obviously, the logical centrality of the resource-rich organization. (Bennett and Segerberg 2013, 53)

It is from this perspective, from a starting point of connective action that the networks themselves become organizing units. Clay Shirky (2010) attributes this starting point, this propensity to contribute, to technologies that have been conducive to engaging the "cognitive surplus" of individuals. He describes this free time that citizens around the world have as an enormous resource, citing the annual number of TV viewing hours of

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[7] The term "netizen" has entered common usage in the English language, and is understood to be a person who is an avid Internet user and active participant in online communities, with an element of propriety and responsibility to their conduct online. The Chinese term *wangmin* has an equivalent meaning.

[8] The earliest case of such an investigation occured in 1995 involves a poisoned Tsinghua University student whose condition doctors were unable to diagnose. Friends of the victim who attended Beijing University and had access to Internet and e-mail used BBSs to investigate the cause and contact overseas experts including doctors and toxicologists. For comprehensive coverage: http://www.dailydot.com/society/zhu-ling-sun-wei-petition-case/

[9] Individuals are often wrongly-accused by crowd-sourced investigations that manage to turn up private information on such individuals, including phone numbers, addresses, identity-card numbers, and their employers. A recent example here: http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-25913472

Americans as an example of how much idle time there is out there (that number is 200 billion hours per year), and how small a proportion of it is required to collaboratively create monumental things, such as Wikipedia (approximately 100 million hours).[10] Nonetheless, technology is just one input that interacts with particular contexts:

> Once you've figured out how to tap the surplus in a way that people care about, others can replicate your techniques, over and over, around the world […] The question we now face--all of us who have access to new models of sharing--is what we'll do with those opportunities. The question will be answered more decisively by the opportunities we provide for one another and by the culture of the groups we form than by any particular technology. (Shirky 2010)

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to investigate the relationship between multi-functional mobile instant messaging and new cultures of self-motivated sharing or a fundamentally different connective logic within networks in China, the persistence of widespread and unorganized large-scale resistance in China certainly renders this a fascinating topic for future inquiries into the underlying organizing dynamics of collective resistance and the role of networks and ICT. Before reviewing the literature on contentious politics in China through the two contending theoretical frameworks, political opportunities and resource mobilization, I will begin with a brief historical overview of this field of study in China.

Defining and Contextualizing Contentious Politics in Authoritarian China

The study of contention in China has expanded remarkably quickly since the 1990s, as collective action amongst industrial workers, religious groups, homeowners, collective petitioners, and hyper-nationalists have led to a growing literature on China's culture of contention. Scholarship in the field since the 1990s has broadened remarkably, particularly in methodological scope when compared to studies of contention conducted

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[10] Shirky's calculation of Wikipedia's required human input hours is a very rough approximation compared to the statistics on the number of TV viewing hours of Americans. Nevertheless, his argument that the miniscule proportion of free time that is required to invest in a public good is well taken.

during the immediate post-revolutionary era up until the late 1980s (Tarrow 2008, 3). The major works of that period by the likes of Lucien Bianco, Elizabeth Perry, Merle Goldman and Mark Selden have taken a historical approach in studying only the monumental social revolutions and rural rebellions in Chinese history. Political obstacles precluded field work in China, limiting scholarship in this growing area of study to historical events with sufficient documentary sources. Studies of media and communications in China by Western scholars have been similarly afflicted by issues of access, limiting scholars to official media as data sources (Yu 2011, 68), and also preventing any scholars of popular resistance in China from acquiring greater insights into how media and communications influenced contention.

However the opening of the Chinese economy and relative liberalization of media organizations and academic institutions gave scholars greater access to what has been happening on the ground in China, from the large-scale labour strikes that have dogged manufacturing firms in manufacturing hubs such as Dongguan, to the smallest of acts of resistance in rural villages. From 1993 to 2005, the annual number of contentious political acts according to official reports increased from 8,700 to 87,000 (approximately 250 incidents per day) (Cai 2008, 163), increasing not only the number of events from which scholars of contentious politics in China could draw upon, but also allowing contemporary events to shift their methodologies from historical approaches, to those that scholars of social movements in Latin American and Eastern Europe were increasingly congregating around – political opportunities, collective framing, mobilizing structures, and the approach that will be used here, a network approach (Tarrow 2008, 4). The following review of the literature on contention in China will draw from all of these dominant approaches, though the common thread that runs through much of this literature is the rootedness of leadership and action in interpersonal networks rather than organizations. And the question that I raise from this literature is whether or not ICT has come to be used by individuals in ways that enhance these networks as organizing agents for digitally networked action.

Political Opportunities and Leadership in China: State Structures and Fragmented Power

While McAdam's pioneering political process model developed out of his exploration of the American Civil Rights movement, the model has proved highly applicable to the dynamic forces influencing contentious collective action throughout China starting with the 1989 democracy movement. China's cases of contention provide a vast and diverse array of geographic, political, ethnic, and social contexts which scholars have explored in great depth. Taken together, the study of contentious politics in China through the political process model demonstrates that outcomes of contention are highly dependent on external, structural factors that provide both opportunities and threats to mobilization. China scholars have unpacked political opportunity by social group, region, issue, and level of government, and their work has coalesced in a rich body of work on political processes in contentious politics in China in the last two decades.

The intersection between political opportunity and informal social networks is well-explicated in Shi and Cai's (2006) study of sustained collective resistance by a network of homeowners in a greenbelt community in Shanghai. They argue that both horizontal and vertical networks operate within a contemporary culture of connections (*guanxi)* in China that not only affect how collective resistance is organized, but its possibilities for success:

> Horizontally, networks among prospective participants promote group solidarity and participation in collective action. Vertically, networks between participants and officials may significantly contribute to the success of the action. First, social networks with individual officials serve as a source of information that helps participants formulate and implement strategies. Secondly, such social networks become a channel through which citizens influence the decision-making of state agencies and generate pressure on the target of collective action, thereby inspiring confidence in the participants. Thirdly, networks also help citizens to access political resources under the control of the party-state, such as the media. (316)

Interestingly, the highly strategic horizontal network of participants acting as organizing agents and leaders operated in the absence of any formal organization of the participants,

or any rights-based groups, raising questions about the dynamics of how these networks mobilized collective action. Despite the existence of government-sanctioned neighbourhood committees and neighbourhood groups in this particular community, Shi and Cai attribute mobilization to the leadership of one resident and his social network within the community and within various local governing units. Additionally, the leader's connections with both state and privatized news organizations and local police allowed him to locate ample opportunities in the structure of power between media and state organs to sustain collective action. Shi and Cai argue that the leader's use of *guanxi* within his personal network allowed him to capitalize on opportunities within institutional hierarchies between the municipal government, district government, and its main opponent, the state-owned estate firm. However, stepping back to look more broadly at the case of this single leader, what is evident is a highly complex and large network of both strong and weak ties that acted as a mobilizing structure for sustained action, action that included multiple collective petitions, appeals to media and various government offices to conduct investigations, and stalling tactics such as destruction of the disputed constructed project in their greenbelt space. At no point in the seven year process of resistance did the activists form or utilize organizations as their primary mode of mobilization. In fact, the involvement of self-governing resident committees and resident groups impeded mobilization when district authorities who had invested in the project sought to use them to demobilize residents (326).

Shi and Cai conclude that state authority in China has become highly fragmented between different levels of government, and across departments, each with its own priorities, creating opportunities for those mounting resistance to take advantage of the interests of higher levels of authority, who can exert pressure on those below (329). While it is suggested quite broadly that power has become fragmented throughout the Chinese state, whether these different levels of government and overlapping units have common interests and can act in concert in responding to contention is nonetheless an important determinant of outcomes of resistance. Such structural conditions, however, only explain part of the puzzle. The mobilizing structure of the leader's network of both strong and weak ties, and its interaction with the networks of his supporters is another

aspect of the political process that intersects with the state-level analysis offered by Shi and Cai.

The importance of leadership in the political opportunity model is also reflected well in Wang's (2012) study of collective petitioning in rural China, which suggests that leadership within interpersonal networks are particularly important in rural contexts. Wang concluded from her study of the growth in collective petitioning in 120 villages across six provinces in China that the decentralization of fiscal autonomy from the local to the county level and the conduct of village elections have realigned the loyalties of village cadres from their official superiors to their disaffected fellow villagers. This change in loyalties has resulted in their greater involvement in leading collective petitions, and demonstrates a shift in the boundaries between state and society (Wang 2012, 698). These cadres locate, create, and utilize political opportunities to challenge state authority, and furthermore take an active leadership role in sharing with villagers their knowledge of strategies, opportunities and the probability of certain tactics being successful. Since the beginning of economic reforms in the 1980s, village cadres have acted as grassroots elites in rural China, demonstrating a power to protect their communities from overreaching state actors by working in concert with various local organizations such as temples, lineage institutions and traditional social networks.

Broadly speaking, higher-level authorities prioritize regime legitimacy and the maintenance of social stability, while lower-level authorities prioritize development of their local economies and infrastructure, while also responsible for policy implementation. Particularly during the Hu Jintao/Wen Jiabao administration, a paternalistic vision of the party-state reinforced a tendency for higher-level authorities to intervene when lower-level authorities' instigated collective resistance (Zhao 2008, Chapter 5). Nonetheless, even at the local level, the image of harsh, profit-driven local authorities belies a complex and often highly personal level of interaction between contentious actors and government officials. Despite the heavy costs of surveilling "trouble-makers" who are suspected of organizing collective action or seeking redress in Beijing, lower-level government officials often sympathize with them, and commonly spend considerable amounts of money to deter their resistance, demonstrating

considerable restraint in using criminal charges and violence to quash dissent (Chen 2012, 67). Thus, political opportunities exist in this broadly fragmented state structure, though lower-levels of government demonstrate ambivalence in their tactics of repression.

And while O'Brien and Stern (in O'Brien 2008, 13) argue that the study of contentious politics in China and other non-democratic states has proceeded quite separately from that of the mainstream literature on industrialized democracies, studies of political processes, opportunities, and leadership in China since the events of 1989 have expanded to explore a wide range of forms of resistance across a diverse set of geographic, demographic and cultural contexts. In a short time, this body of work has contributed greatly to the development of the political process model in contentious politics outside of the Global North, and has been able to provide in a short time some fascinating conclusions about the conditions under which some contentious collective actions in China are successful or maintained at the very least, while others are easily repressed or thwarted.

Beyond the structure of political opportunity, there remains a considerable gap between studies of political opportunities in China and the rapidly changing Chinese political economy (Tarrow 2008, 7). There is no denying that official statistics on contention in China show an increase that coincides with the rapid economic growth in China since the opening and reform of its economy. And certainly, observations of large-scale labour strikes in China's manufacturing hubs from 2009 to 2012 in the midst of moderate domestic economic growth in a global recession raise fascinating questions about the precise links between this broader structural context for contention in China.

Although structural threats and opportunities form the crux of the political process model, patterns in the role of interpersonal networks and modes of communication emerge from these events. These studies of opportunities and leadership incorporate into their analysis the contemporary practices of *guanxi*, or connections, which uniquely order the interactions of actors within these structures of opportunities and threats. Thus, a network approach to contentious politics would be sensitive to the various ways in which obligations and advantages of *guanxi* imbue interpersonal networks with forms of social

capital that may be unique to China and the way contentious collective action is mobilized. The concept and practice of *guanxi* within social networks will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Resource Mobilization Without Organizations: Networked Action in China

Communal Ties in China

Studies of contention in China from a resource mobilization approach have often focused on communal ties rather than organizations as the key mobilizing structures in localized collective action. Kuang and Göbel (2013) describe the relationships of family, kin and clan as strong ties that are integral to engaging individuals in sustained collective action against authorities. They note in their study of housing activism that the weak ties in participants' interpersonal networks (those they associated with on a routine basis) were not significant in mobilizing participants. In fact, it was the "re-activated ties" of family, kin, and clan that mobilized support. The threat of being ostracized and labeled a "coward" in their community and families was a significant factor in decisions to participate. On the other hand, those detained by authorities in demonstrations were described as heroes (858). Kuang and Göbel found that the effect of networks evident in Shi and Cai's (2006) study was more limited, and when repression from authorities increased, it was an adaptive leadership that was critical to sustaining protests. An adaptive leadership possessed the ability to "adjust its strategies and frames when faced with challenges that threaten its survival," (Kuang and Göbel 2013, 859). The success of this case of resistance involved 4 adaptive traits: studying and utilizing laws and regulations, adjusting routines and framing of issues when faced with repression, utilizing modern ICT, and imposing a division of labour on the protesters.

Communal Ties that Demobilize

The influence of interpersonal networks is also evident in cases of demobilization of collective action over contentious issues. Where members within a communal network may be partially responsible for contributing to a problem or implicated in some way,

communal ties may preclude any contentious collective action. Deng and O'Brien's (2013) study of environmental mobilization in rural contexts concluded that when pollution was found to be caused by fellow villagers, their willingness to seek redress from the state was constrained, as community relations and economic dependency outweigh any individual or collective interest in confronting an issue. The dynamics of this demobilization was explored in great detail by Deng and O'Brien, who focused on the relational repression that was utilized by state officials who developed a strategy of assembling work teams from within collective movements. These teams were dispatched by officials to work with protestors to demobilize them and stop any further protest activity.

The question asked in this study is to what extent the rapidly evolving ICT such as *Weixin*, with integrated mass and interpersonal communications, are changing interpersonal networks in ways that might be conducive to the solidary pressures of these communal environments? Kuang and Göbel's participants were said to boycott the weddings and funerals of non-participants. Social media platforms such as *Weixin* arguably amplify the severity of such tactics through the public-ness described by Boyd (2010) of all mediated publics: its replicability, searchability, persistence, and the invisible audiences. As members of this community were often geographically dispersed (some worked in nearby or other cities), the ostracization of non-participants through various social events can be shared more easily with wider community members or those not present.

The impact of ICT on maintaining ties, and the substance of their mediated interactions is a highly under-researched topic in China. And given the dramatic increases in both domestic and transnational migration experienced by Chinese people today, it is imperative that we achieve a greater understanding of whether or not emerging multi-functional instant messaging platforms contribute to maintaining individuals' social networks through disruptions in proximity. The maintenance of trusting relationships with a core network of strong ties, in addition to an expanded network of weak ties are essential to mobilization of contentious collective action in illiberal regimes through solidary incentives, relational pressure, reciprocal obligations.

Broadly speaking, a network approach that treats social movements as networks renders the relationship between movements and their spatial forms explicit (Diani 2000, 387), and challenges researchers to observe the way certain types of networks interact with physical spaces in the form of public and mediated forms of communication (such as posters in public squares) or public, direct forms of communication (such as demonstrations, or other disruptive tactics).[11] This is most evident in the study of labour contention in China, which has consistently exhibited a networked form of organization heavily rooted in the social space of the dormitory-workplace system commonly used in China's manufacturing hubs that depend on a large migrant workforce. Ngai and Chan's (2009) comparative case study of labour strikes in 2004 and 2007 found that living and working spaces could not be understood as separate spaces, as factory-provided housing and shop corners became organizing grounds for workers who converged around the common issue of wages that did not meet legal minimums. The compression of space and time that is so critical to low-cost manufacturing is an even more valuable resource for unorganized labour interests, as sustained disruptive tactics during times of crisis were organized with incredible speed, spontaneity, and success. Interestingly, in the case of labour protests, without support from trade unions or labour organizations, the hierarchies of the workplace tend to be replicated in the networks of participants, and then in the mobilization of collective action, as technicians, skilled workers and line supervisors acted as leaders (Chan and Ngai 2009, 302) rather than passive participant. What is more notable about these cases is that even as organizers were detained in the early stages of the protest, subsequent protests were spontaneously organized by others without clear leadership, and the demands made to the factory owners as well as the framing of the issue changed throughout the course of the unrest.

Beyond the use of mobile phones for instrumental purposes in co-ordinating protest action, little is known about the use of mobile telephones among participants in maintaining or building their networks, and how these networks were called upon in gathering resources, and ultimately mobilizing action. And as mobile phones become an

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[11] See Diani's typology of private and public forms of communication, which include (1) public and direct (2) public and mediated) (3) private and direct (4) private and mediated, in Diani, Mario (2000) "Social Movement Networks: Virtual and Real," in *Information, Communication & Society* 3:3, 386-401.

increasingly common part of modern life for a growing proportion of the Chinese population, and has generated fascinating scholarship on the formation of mobile social networks for marginalized populations, including migrant workers (Law and Peng 2008) and young female migrants (Willis 2013), the ways in which mobile connectivity has altered social networks as mobilizing agents is a highly overlooked area of study in China.

Mobilizing Structure of Mobile Connectivity

The most relevant and recently conducted empirical study of mobile phone-assisted popular protest in China has come from Jun Liu's (2013) comparative case study of the anti-Paraxylene protest in the city of Xiamen in 2007 (summarized in the Introduction of this thesis) and a rural protest in Weng'an over a contested homicide investigation. In both these cases, Liu found that usage of mobile phones exhibited four key effects. First, it allowed citizens to bypass government and mass media and share sensitive information with one another. In the Xiamen case, citizens disseminated text messages regarding the possible environmental and health risks of the construction of a paraxylene manufacturing plant, estimated to generate annual revenues of 80 billion Chinese yuan (10.4 billion USD).

What is notable about the Xiamen protest was the obvious absence of formal organizations in the mobilization process. The issue of lack of public consultation reached the political agenda of the Xiamen city government via a more formal network of individuals with organizational ties, however, the initial mobilization of collective action began with a mediated network. A resident of The Future Coast, a luxury residential community, posted a complaint to a local real estate forum about a nearby wastewater treatment facility and chemical plant, and included his mobile number in the post. He then began receiving calls from neighbours in the same community and they decided to lodge collective complaints via e-mail and letters to state and district governments, the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) and the National Development

and Reform Commission (NDRC), which were ignored.[12] The issue was then taken up by an academic at Xiamen University, Yufen Zhao, who along with six other faculty members, and 104 fellow members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference presented a petition detailing the environmental and health hazards of the proposed PX complex at a "Two Congresses" meeting in March 2007 (Liu 2014, 1005). Despite the petition, the project was later approved and accelerated by the NDRC and not long after, the now locally infamous text message detailing the proposed projects' risks spread rapidly.

The instrumental contribution of mobile phones in this case is obvious, as differences in censorship strategies implemented by the state through telecommunications providers over mobile communications and Web content are perhaps what could explain the unhindered spread of the popular text message in this case. However what is more puzzling is the more complex ways in which social ties were brought to bear on mobilizing action. Liu's (2014) interviews with participants were highly revealing in this regard, as participants described their relationships with those who invited them to participate in the event:

> "…the [mobilization] message is, more relevant, an appeal from your social network. In other words, the people you know or have a close relationship with are seeking your response, help, and support. How could you thrust aside this kind of appeal?"

Such findings reveal the importance of exploring the interpretative aspects of individual agency in social networks, particularly as it relates to the decision-shaping function of networks (Passy 2003). The ways in which these networks are nurtured on a daily basis and mobilized in times of crisis are central to understanding how contentious collective action in China is organized.

Early examples of mediated activism in China through prior web platforms are helpful in contextualizing the SNS and mobile-assisted mobilization mentioned above. In May 2000, hundreds of university students in Beijing participated in campus

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[12] See http://www.china.org.cn/english/China/239357.htm for detailed timeline of events relating to the Xiamen anti-PX protest.

demonstrations and a memorial march following the murder of a Beijing University student. News of the murder and the university authorities' unsatisfactory response spread to other universities in China, where students mobilized and staged co-ordinated demonstrations. This case offers an interesting example of mobilization via Bulletin Boards (BBS), which were the most common communication platforms for university students in China before the introduction of blogs and microblogging. According to Yang (2008), this incident depicts what the Chinese authorities commonly refer to as "linking up" (*chuanlian)*, an organizational act Yang says authorities dread most :

> One important factor in the fast spread of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s was that students travelled across the country to link up with students in other cities. Such linking up was a way of solidarity building and mobilization. It was possible in the 1960s partly because of state sponsorship. In the decades after the Cultural Revolution, especially at times of popular unrest, authorities became extremely wary of "linking up." In May 2000, Chinese online protesters developed new ways of linking up through creative use of the internet. I call these spatial linkages. The most influential in this protest were the links between cyberspace and physical spaces […]. (Yang 2008, 137)

In this case, university BBS's were integral to communication between university students across the country to facilitate co-ordinated demonstrations, though students did not travel to "link up" in the way students did during the Cultural Revolution. However, spatial linkages instead were made, as printed messages and posters from the BBS were distributed across the Beijing University campus, reflecting the tradition of "big character" posters that characterize collective protest in China historically. Yang argues that what sets Internet contention through BBS apart from earlier, unmediated forms of protest is a distinctly new form of dialogue, or what Charles Tilly refers to as "contentious conversation," which is characterized by mutual and contradictory claims. Contentious conversation alone is not enough to mount challenges to authority or opposition, some form of organizing agent is necessary to mobilize any form of action. Thus, it is not only that the BBS facilitates linking up that occurs between individuals across geographical boundaries and in spatial forms, but that the BBS platform facilitated the creation of contentious conversation that was extended through direct means of communication in campus spaces, not unlike the ways in which dormitories and public meeting spaces organize contention among workers.

If we consider the communication practices of BBS and mobile phones comparatively, we can begin to see a significant difference in the engagement of one's networks. While the BBS was an interactive forum, the platform does not incorporate interpersonal networks the way mobile phones did in cases such as the anti-PX protests. New communication platforms such as SNS and *Weixin* are grounded in existing social networks and I would argue that the interaction of these networks with contentious conversations amplify their potential for "linking up" with offline acts. The integration of personal networks (i.e. *Weixin* chats) into the public platforms of contentious conversation in cyberspace (i.e. microblogging and other social network sites) render mediated interpersonal networks as powerful mobilizing structures for contentious collective action. What is most notable about these early interactive platforms that should inform research on future communication tools to come is their rootedness in the social interactions and public space of the real world.

Returning to the remediation in ICT in China from the popular BBS, to microblogs and SNS, and now multi-functional mobile instant messaging, there has been a shift towards what is arguably a freer space of autonomy, as described by Castells (2012). BBS are similar to microblogs and *Weixin* in their interactivity, allowing users to interact with one another in creating online content and shaping discourse. However, the limits of the BBS as a free space are obvious, as forum moderators' active control of permissible content is usually conspicuous, and complete blocking of BBS, web sites, and blogs is not unheard of. Privacy and autonomy in *Weixin* will be explored further in the Chapter 5 of this thesis.

Internet-based contention has challenged scholars in how to conceptualize cyberspace and physical space in relation to one another, as discussions of virtual and real tend to proceed in a persistent dichotomous pairing. However, given the increasing complexity of modern communications technologies, the simple dichotomy of cyberspace and the real world is constantly being challenged. As social movements in recent years such as the Arab uprisings beginning in 2010 and the various Occupy movements in 2011 have taken place as much in cyberspace as they have in urban public space, neither internet-based contention or social movements in the streets can be studied

as distinct phenomena. Castells (2012, 222) argues that the space in which movements take place in modern times is always comprised of an interaction between the space of flows on the Internet and wireless communication networks, as well as the physical space of sites of symbolic significance to an issue. He calls this third, hybrid, in-between space the "space of autonomy," the new spatial form of networked social movements. Autonomy is central to these contemporary networked social movements, but can only exist when one can organize in the free space of communication networks. More importantly, the transformative power of action in this third space is contingent upon the use and reclamation of urban space. Thus, claims-making in networked contentious politics is dependent on autonomous communication networks while still deeply rooted in the space of the real world. And in the case of the Beijing University incident in 2000, the BBS served as a relatively free forum that facilitated the organization of participants in distributing information regarding the issue, and led to the use of physical space and historically relevant forms of contention (public, "big character" posters), leading to contentious collective action offline (multiple demonstrations and a memorial march from Beijing University through the city to Tsinghua University).

"Unorganized Interests" in China

Taken together, the literature on contention in China, from both a political opportunities and resource mobilization perspective highlights a few broad trends in mobilization of contentious collective action in China. Much of the contention that occurs in China today garners attention by virtue of the sheer size and passion of the collective participants, making for neat narratives in the mass media about ordinary Chinese people finding a greater sense of rights consciousness in the midst of social and economic upheavals. Most contentious collective action in China is referred to colloquially as *naoshi*, to take to the streets to make trouble ("*nao*" meaning "noise"). However, look beyond the noise, and the striking thing about much of this contention is the relatively minor role played by both formal and informal organizations. It is for this reason that the more convincing literature on resource mobilization in China has tended to focus on grassroots elites and communal ties, rather than explanations based on autonomous organizations or an

emergent civil society in China (Chen 2012, 9). Mobilization of contentious collective action in China since the beginning of the Reform era has been described by Zhou (1993) as an effect of a "large numbers" phenomenon. The institutional structure of state socialism creates a "swarm of bees" with similar experiences, similar demands, and similar (unorganized) interests that are logically directed at the state as the source of the problem and the solution. And in a political system without intermediaries between state and society, a system that "directly links each citizen with the state and thus reduces all social groups to a similar structural position subordinate to the state and its bureaucratic organizations," what appears as collective action is in fact spontaneous and unorganized (59). Disparate groups ultimately converge upon the same targets and broad grievances. Zhao's broad structural arguments are well taken, however I believe the "swarm of bees" he describes is further structured by the particular dynamics of their social networks and altered by their active uses of various modes of communication.

Organizing logics are most difficult to discern when it comes to large-scale labour strikes in China, though they are among the most commonly studied form of contention. There are no shortage of incidents to choose from either, even prior to the labour shortages in the manufacturing core of the Pearl River Delta beginning in 2010 that have been highly conducive to successful strike action. However, fragmented social relations within workplaces have impeded the mobilization of working class labour strikes in China (Cai 2005, Chapter 4). There are certainly organizations that have emerged among workers in China, organizations that have successfully mobilized the collective action of workers (The Peasant Workers' Association, The Association of Brothers, The Association of Friends, and The Strike Committee). Nonetheless, divisions within firms along the lines of class, age, gender, native place, ethnicity, and nationality intersect with differences in personal characteristics, such as one's skills, ambition, work ethic, education, and training. Such fragmentation, by no means an accident, serves the interests of a firm's owners, as it can lead to radically different assessments of one's own interests and the benefits of collective action, effectively preventing mobilization. Some firms go to great lengths to manipulate workers' spatial organization so as to minimize communication and the likelihood of strong bonds by alternating work shifts for workers

who share rooms (preventing them from interacting in their rooms) or intentionally divining workers who share common hometowns into different rooms (Chang 2008, 58).

Organizations on the Periphery

Social organizations[13] certainly exist in China, and the environmental sector offers a progressive example of an evolving state-society relationship. Environmental NGOs have benefitted from an expanded political space to initiate change and push the boundaries of their mandates since the beginning of the "greening" of China's development strategy in since the mid-1990s (Ho 2001, 893). However, the co-evolution of NGOs with the party-state apparatus has thus far resulted in a highly prescribed role for such entities to engage the public through specific forms of participation and specific avenues of redress, with limited potential for mobilization of contentious collective action when outcomes are not satisfactory (Han 2014). Collective petitions[14] seeking public consultations or demanding investigations into malfeasance or criminal offences are typically the extent of collective campaigning that will be organized and initiated by NGOs, independently or collaboratively with other organizations (Zhan and Tang 2013, 393).

The relationship between the state and social organizations in China has become increasingly co-dependent, as the state needs such organizations to assist in implementing policy and filling capacity gaps, while organizations need the state to ensure it has the political space and mandate to pursue their (limited) goals. However, this co-dependence easily leads to weak institutionalization of social organizations that depend heavily on the personal, political connections of NGO leaders – who are

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[13] I take the lead from Peter Ho (2002) in using the term "social organization" (*shehuituanti)* to denote both non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and "government organized" NGOs (GONGOs), both of which are understood by the Chinese government to be citizen-led voluntary institutions that are aimed at achieving a certain purpose without profit.

[14] Some China scholars define collective petitions in the Chinese context to be akin to popular resistance, particularly in cases where they breach legally permissible forms. For instance, the *Regulations on Letters and Visits* only allows five representatives to present a collective petition to a state organ. As such, any petition presented in person by more than five representatives begins to move into the realm of contention. See Yu Tao and Mingxing Liu (2013) "Intermediate associations, grassroots elites and collective petitioning in rural China," in *Elites and Governance in China*. Eds. Xiaowei Zang and Chien-wen Kou. Oxon: Routledge.

themselves often social elites – in order to gain access to policy-making procedures (Zhan and Tang 2013, 393). Goals get compromised in order for NGOs to take advantage of political opportunities (e.g. discord between overlapping political bodies, new laws, policies and regulations) or to build long term relationships with political actors in key governing bodies. Such compromises are made at the expense of not only the autonomy of NGOs and their capacity to pursue greater demands from the state, but also their very survival in the long term (Hildebrandt 2013, 4). And while the movement of environmental NGOs into some limited policy advocacy activities signals progress in China's closed political system, the bulk of work done by most NGOs – particularly in the case of grassroots and unregistered organizations – is primarily in education and conservation functions that are deemed non-political and non-confrontational (Zhan and Tang 2013, 391). For those registered NGO's that are recognized by relevant state organs, their greater contribution has been in creating pressure from the bottom for greater implementation of deliberative and participatory practices in the policy-making process that involve civil society organizations and the public (Han 2014, 175; Zhan and Tang 2013, 395).

A look at the legal constraints on NGOs reveals a complex strategy of state control. The *Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Organizations* limits the growth of NGO's in two surprising ways. No locality can contain more than one NGO in any one functional administrative arena, and an NGO must be sponsored by a state agency or institution in order to be properly registered (Han 2014, 177). As such, if an organization manages to find a state sponsor, even a city as large as Shanghai can only sponsor one environmental protection NGO. In practice, this makes it difficult for organizations to become legitimate, and makes it nearly impossible for them to scale up and expand their operations to other cities where they will inevitably find an existing registered NGO. Collaboration and information-sharing between organizations becomes very unlikely in such a context (Han 2014, 177). Homeowners' associations offer an example of the constraints on horizontal networking between organizations that can potentially build mass bases (Yip and Jiang 2011, 748). Broadly speaking, the emergence of NGO's in most sectors is rather "harmonious," as they have come to act in service of the state (Hildebrandt 2013, 5). For such organizations, contentious action involving the

public and direct collaboration with other social organizations is extremely risky business. Operating as they do within the highly precarious structural constraints of the state's organizational apparatus, the role of NGOs cannot be described as autonomous (Zhou 1993, 57).

How does this complicated relationship between state and social organizations affect their ability to interact with individuals in any collective action? Given the fragmentation of individual interests that can undermine collective action, officially-sanctioned organizations that operate under limited mandates are unlikely to generate collective frames that might differ from the Party line and that are effective at overcoming fragmented interests, engaging communities, or reflecting the broader public sentiments on issues. Without formal membership or mandates that resonate with potential client populations, organizations cannot contribute to the mobilization of contentious collective action.

It is important to note that the embedded institutionalization and elite socialization evident in NGOs as described is not all together unique to China. Zald and Ash's (1966) pioneering analysis of SMO's describes these very processes that Chinese NGOs have undergone in recent years. Three processes are common to most SMOs over time: goal transformation, a shift to organizational maintenance, and oligarchization. While the oligarchization may follow a more uniquely Chinese pattern of social relations (*guanxi*), the broader pattern of transformation of goals and self-preservation in professionalized organizations is evident. Nonetheless, social organizations in China continue to grow in size and numbers, and despite the highly structured environment of permissible challenges to the state, it would be unfair to say that social organizations are negligible actors in contentious politics in China. The benefits they offer the state in facilitating policy implementation guarantees their continued existence, and as social organizations continue to exploit opportunities to institutionalize participatory practices that engage the broader pubic and NGOs in the policy process, organizations in China will matter more. Participatory practices such as public consultations are opportunities around which networked collective actions can form.

Shifting Attention to China's Millennials and Networked Action

Despite the rapid expansion of research into contentious politics in China since the 1980s, two significant shortcomings are apparent. First, research on the political process of contention in China, and research on internet activism in China have proceeded quite separately from each other, despite being intimately involved in social changes in China. The second oversight in research on contention in China is the noticeable lack of attention given to the mobilizing structures for engaging China's youth in collective action. Much of the literature on contention in China has focused on the have-nots, and there is now quite an impressive body of work on peasant protests, industrial worker strikes, pensioners strikes, collective petitions led by village cadres (O'Brien and Li 2006; Hurst and O'Brien 2002; Wang 2012). Thus, the grievances of farmers and workers have been explored extensively in their unique local, historical, economic, cultural, and symbolic contexts. However, the technologically savvy, middle-class youth of China have not received the same attention. The collective resistance of the upwardly mobile middle-class has garnered some scholarly attention. Studies of homeowners' collective actions have suggest that upwardly mobile homeowners behave moderately in an effort to avoid disrupting the political order, and demonstrate a limited ability to stage disruptive types of contentious collective action (Wang et al. 2013; Cai 2005).

The above-noted studies reflect O'Brien's suggestion that social class in China should uniquely influence the repertoires of the disgruntled, leading them to choose among contained, transgressive, or boundary-spanning forms of claims-making (O'Brien 2008, 21). What we do not know is how new media have affected the social networks of China's millenials, and whether or not any changes are conductive to mobilization of contentious collective action. China's urban, tech-savvy youth have at their disposal tools that could enable them to develop the larger social networks than previous generations, networks that span vast geographic spaces, both domestically and transnationally. And as young people around the world exhibit greater enthusiasm and skill in using and adapting technologies for their own purposes, they may reveal more quickly the potential uses of new innovations (Castells and Fernández-Ardèvol 2007, 247).

In the case of China, the logic of collective action raises interesting questions about the role of organizations in applying a network approach to illiberal regimes. Without a legally-protected role for civic organizations, let alone autonomous SMOs, and without a citizenry that enjoys freedom of association, the ways in which individuals organize in large-scale action is not well accounted for in existing literature on network approaches in social movement theory (for both democratic and non-democratic contexts) that still assume organizations to be at the core of contentious collective action. As contention has continued to climb in China, scholars have developed solid explanations of the structural opportunities that facilitate contentious collective action, the spatial organization of action, and the leadership strategies that mobilize and sustain action. However, the particular role of mediated networks has yet to be fully explored. To be clear, I am not simply asking how ICT are used by participants in instrumental ways to engage in contentious collective action in much the same way as they always have in China. Rather, the question is how mobile instant messaging is affecting mediated networks in ways that might facilitate mobilization. More specifically, I am asking if formal social organizations in China do not matter, how does *Weixin* contribute to mediated social networks that might take their place as organizing agents that can mobilize individuals to contentious collective action.

More importantly, the mobilizing mechanisms of unorganized, collective protest in China are largely unknown, as the most recent and well-known protests have yet to be studied empirically through a network lens.[15] The success or failures of networks to mobilize, and under what conditions they are able to sustain resistance needs rigorous empirical study. There is little knowledge of how the quality of engagement in contention that is mobilized through networks might be improved. Neither can we draw any conclusions about the power of networked crowds to achieve their purposes. Such assessments involve far closer examination at intervening variables such as political

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[15] Recent incidents that warrant such an analysis include a massive labour strike at footwear factories owned by Yue Yuen Holdings in Dongguan in late April of 2014 that mobilized an estimated crowd of 40,000 workers; Paraxylene-related protests (Kunming 2012, Maoming 2014) have exhibited high uses of mobile technology though little has been reported in mass media about the involvement of formal organizations, leadership or their organizing mechanisms.

opportunities. As such, the empowered, "mobile civil society" that Castells envisions[16] is far from an observable reality in China. Yet what is remarkable is that contentious collective actions in China have been able to achieve some level of what Tilly (2006) describes as "WUNC," that is, collective acts that exhibit *worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment,* without the support of autonomous social organizations. Some incidents gain *worthiness* through the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of their grievances by higher levels of government and positive media coverage; *unity* is evident in the common symbols and expressions used by participants, particularly in tactics that span geographical space; *numbers* are amassed through the mobilization of a large core of active participants as well as passive participants and supportive by-standers, mobilizations that can empty factory floors and fill public spaces in the span of minutes; and *commitment* is evident in risking personal resources and facing punishment or repression. What this study seeks to explore are the ways in which *Weixin* is used to build interpersonal networks comprised of both weak and strong ties that can contribute to mobilization of collective acts. Furthermore, a sense of privacy on *Weixin* is critical to the potential for this space to support self-expression and dialogue within networks, without which individuals cannot become socialized in contentious issues or mobilized to collective action. The ways in which communication has altered social networks mediated by *Weixin* can have a huge impact on their potential as organizing agents in an illiberal regime. The centrality of mediated networks in the lives of young people in China may lead them towards a form of engagement that need not follow a collective action logic that depends on organizations to mobilize action. Rather, it is possible that online networks have the potential to mobilize unorganized action.

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[16] A "mobile civil society" is defined as a society transformed by social movements characterized by collectively intense mobile communication between individuals and groups in an autonomous alternative public space. See Castells, Manuel (2007). Mobile Communications: A Global Perspective. Massachussetts: MIT Press.

Chapter 3: Mobilizing Structure of Interpersonal Networks and "Masspersonal" Communication

Both public and private mediated spaces cultivate interpersonal networks that are necessary for contentious collective action. In non-democratic states, without formal social organizations and a vibrant civil society, pre-existing social networks are integral to mobilizing contentious collective action. Osa's (2003,78) study of Leninist regimes and Communist-era Poland explores the ways in which social networks substitute for both autonomous organizations and an uncensored mass media, where social networks helped overcome barriers to participation by opening channels for uncensored materials to circulate, providing contacts that locate and share material resources, diffusing the risks of association, and most broadly, substituting for a public sphere and forming a context for micromobilization processes such as the negotiation of protest frames and counterframes. Pre-existing social networks nurture critical thinking, provide trust, and incubate resistance in the face of a repressive state that stifles the formation of formal organizations and structures (Passy 2003, 41; Osa 2003, 79). Studies that focus on the recruitment of new participants to contentious collective action demonstrate the salience of trusted ties within social networks in the context of repressive regimes. O'Brien and Vala's (2008) study of recruitment to illicit Protestant house churches in China offers a good example, where trusting relationships were the primary vehicle for recruitment, while recruitment of strangers was facilitated by shared cultural frames based on similar social locations (e.g. rural and agrarian backgrounds).

Studies of contentious politics demonstrate that both trust and normative pressures are necessary for facilitating contentious collective action, and in this section, I will explore how these two elements might be evident in mediated networks. Tarrow (2011) argues that it is in the connective structures between face-to-face groups and social networks that activation of collective action takes place:

> Although it is individuals who decide whether to take up collective action, it is in their face-to-face groups, their social networks, and the connective structures between them that collective action is most often activated and sustained […] It is not "groupness" itself that induces mobilization but the

normative pressures and *solidary incentives* that are encoded within networks, and out of which movements emerge and are sustained. (Tarrow 2011, 30, emphasis mine)

Tarrow argues that individuals' willingness to voice opposition to authorities is triggered by supportive group environments, feelings which otherwise might be tolerated and accepted (2011, 30). As it relates to China, Tarrow also cites an incident in 2010 in Foshan, China at a Honda factory, in which Tan Guocheng, 23-year old factory worker organized a co-ordinated strike with hundreds of workers within his workshop, and another nearby workshop. The incident was the first of many similar strikes that year in the Pearl River Delta, China's manufacturing core. Tarrow concludes from this incident that native-place solidarity was integral to the formation of a network of 50 (mostly Hunanese) workers, and eventually the organization of a contentious collective act – a labor strike (120). A significant question to ask here is not only how trust facilitated the organization of the group, but how individuals with low levels of commitment were influenced by solidary incentives, how private space enabled critical discussion of their interests, and how their mobile connectivity facilitated the formation of this loose network. Much of the organization for this incident was conducted in face-to-face meetings, reflecting existing scholarship on the importance of spatial organization and communal ties in dormitories in labor protests (Lee 2007; Chan and Ngai 2009). Such an analysis assumes a certain level of privacy in these spaces and through these interactions, a matter that may affect mediated networks more than spatially organized networks.

Mobile media complicate this relationship by placing social networks rooted in face-to-face interactions in the physical world alongside digital mass communications. It is incredibly difficult to discern how critical thinking is nurtured by our interpersonal networks in mediated spaces, and whether or not they are affected by the synchronous nature of interpersonal and mass communications in mobile social networks? Studies of digitally mediated communication have demonstrated that ICT can contribute to mobilization of collective action by extending existing networks that exhibit more effective information dissemination and strengthened collective identity and solidarity. However, it is questionable whether or not new ties created in digitally mediated spaces are effective mobilizing structures. Early research on computer mediated

communications (CMC) and social movement networks certainly found that CMC generated more effective mobilization attempts in existing ties, but challenged premature conclusions that new bonds are created that could offer a mobilizing structure (Diani 2000, 387). Thus, it is virtual extensions, rather than virtual communities, that can act as mobilizing structures.

In the Chinese context, virtual follower networks have been found to have an impact in mobilization, as follower networks on micro-blogging sites can operate as effective mobilizing structures by fostering m*icroblog issue-networks*, defined as a network that is comprised of geographically dispersed microblog users converging to advocate a specific issue (Huang and Sun 2014, 87). Microblogging platforms were shown to assist activists, NGOs, and social organizations in expanding the geographic reach of their online networks, which were used for information diffusion. Huang and Sun's (2014, 99) research found that verified accounts[17] on Sina Weibo (the most prominent microblogging service in China) showed higher follower and retweet rates and that microblog users in China tend to follow and share information from those they judge to be credible, trustworthy and professional. However, the effect of one's own network of known individuals on perceptions of reliability of information in microblog issue networks has yet to be explored by scholars.

With the emergence of *Weixin* in China, we need a clearer understanding of how this platform integrates (or separates) one's network of direct contacts with an expanded online network, as well as how the platform is used to disseminate information within this *Weixin* network. Integrated consumption of mass media and participation in interpersonal communications through this multi-functional platform presents a challenge to media scholars on methodological approaches to understanding communication behaviours on *Weixin*. The questionnaire in this study was designed to explore a number of aspects of *Weixin's* uses within social networks, including the users' attitudes towards the use of this medium to build, maintain, and expand both the core and significant ties in their social networks; their interest in sharing information through this platform; and their

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[17] "Verified accounts" are those whose names are confirmed by the Sina account services using official government-issued identity numbers.

attitudes towards the use of *Weixin* to affect the homogeneity of their networks in terms of social background. The questionnaire also sought to obtain an estimate of the general size of the respondents' networks, their uses of multiple channels of communication, and the level of contact that *Weixin* affords them.

Integration of Mass and Interpersonal Communications

Before analyzing the empirical findings on the uses of *Weixin* within digitally mediated interpersonal networks, it is imperative that we unpack the distinction between mass and interpersonal communications. Walther et al.'s (2011) survey of scholarship on mass and interpersonal communications demonstrates that the interaction these two forms of communication cannot be properly explored if they are understood to be mutually exclusive. They suggest that new communication technologies of today require a merger of scholarship on mass communications and interpersonal communications, two fields of inquiry that have proceeded separately from one another. Utilising O'Sullivan's (2005) terminology, they argue that mediated communications today are better understood as "masspersonal" communication, where individuals often use mass communication channels for interpersonal communication, or interpersonal communication channels for mass communication, or in the case of new hybrid communication channels such as *Weixin* to generate mass and interpersonal communication simultaneously. Individuals may send publicly visible messages intended for their "real world" friends through a microblog, or may broadcast a message to their entire social network through the *Weixin* app, or post a news article on their *Weixin* "Moments" profile that is visible to both their intimate friends and broader *Weixin* network.

Thus, while we can consider *Weixin* to be more closely related to an interpersonal communication platform than a mass communication platform such as a microblog, the two are used in different combinations of one or both purposes by different users. Manuel Castells (2012, 220) describes the phenomenon aptly as mass self-communication, that which is "based on horizontal networks of interactive, multidirectional communication on the Internet and even more so, in wireless

communication networks." Even the commonly used term "information and communication technology" must now be understood in some contexts to refer to integrated and interrelated technologies that merge information and communication. Neat distinctions between informational technologies like the Internet and communication technologies like the mobile phone no longer reflect the ways in which technologies are designed, or the ways they evolve in their social context (Bimber et al. 2005, 369). And as is evident from the findings from this participant group, each user exhibits a unique use of *Weixin* to interact with different parts of their network in different ways, some maintaining high numbers of group chats, some using *Weixin* actively to keep their network up to date about their activities, some using it to share news or follow the broadcasts of entertainers or journalists.

Bridging and Bonding Social Capital

Research on the complex concept of social capital and SNS, and the effect of SNS on individuals' interaction with broader communities is useful in making sense of how *Weixin* can affect users' social networks. Social capital can be broadly understood as the resources made available to individuals through their social interactions (Lin 2001). However, as the term has come to be used in a variety of academic disciplines and subdisciplines within economics, political science and sociology, in studying its impacts on families, education, community life, the workplace, and civic engagement, and is given a clearer definition by Adler and Kwon (2002) as "the goodwill that is engendered by the fabric of social relations and that can be mobilized to facilitate action" (Adler and Kwon 2002). In this definition, the goodwill others feel for us is comprised of trust, sympathy and forgiveness, and the effect of this goodwill is the information, influence, and solidarity that we gain access to through these relations.

Recent research on the impact of Internet use and social ties has utilized Putnam's (2000) distinction between bridging and bonding social capital, and shown that SNS increase users' bridging social capital (Ellison et al. 2011), and bonding capital (Valenzuela et al. 2009). Bridging social capital connects individuals across diverse social groups through weak ties, resulting in heterogeneous networks. Bonding social capital brings together people of a similar sort in tightly-knit, strong ties. Networks of

weak ties tend to offer individuals a broader range of information, resources, and opportunities due to the different backgrounds and life situations of each individual (Williams 2006). Conversely, networks of strong ties offer individuals greater emotional support and scarce resources by virtue of their common life situations (Putnam 2000). Heterogeneous communities, those that exhibit bridging social capital (such as Parent-Teacher communities, environmental activist groups, or more formal organizations like the Red Cross) tend to have more positive externalities that include building interpersonal trust, and reinforcing community ties. Conversely, homogenous communities, those that exhibit bonding social capital can result in similarly positive externalities, but are at greater risk of exacerbating existing divides within a given society due to antagonism towards outgroups based on insular thinking (Putnam 2000). Local Ku Klux Klan organizations in America are an extreme, dysfunctional example (Norris 2004, 32).

Adler and Kwon's definition informed the empirical research conducted in this thesis. However, I will focus on social capital as an effect or outcome, rather than social capital as the network itself. As such, the networks are conceived of as the agents or moderators of social capital (Williams 2006, 594). The questionnaire conducted in this study explores *Weixin's* effects on the networks of respondents, not the outcomes of their ties. However, the types of ties in one's networks are a strong predictor of the forms of social capital they will yield (597). Furthermore, it is important to note that studies of social capital in Chinese contexts are further complicated by the arguments of China scholars (both native and non-native) that a distinct concept of social relations, that of *guanxi,* exists in China that is unlike the concept of social capital (Gold et al. 2004), even as it has come to be used quite broadly. While the distinct elements of the concept of *guanxi* were not studied empirically with my participant group, it will be addressed in the discussion of findings in this chapter.

Much of the earlier research conducted on young American students' use of SNS such as Facebook have drawn from Putnam's (2000) "time displacement hypothesis" that argues that the advent of the television led Americans to retreat to the privacy of their homes during the leisure time they otherwise would have spent engaging with people

face-to-face, resulting in a loss of social capital (Nie 2001). Along the same lines, communications theorists have argued that perpetually connected youth are experiencing fundamental changes to their sociability and values through their use of digital technologies (Turkle 2011; Ling 2008). However, empirical research that explores various Internet-based practices and their correlation with conventional exchanges of social capital have found much more nuanced and diverse experiences of Internet use than the above-noted theorists have posited.

This research focuses on networks of bridging and bonding social capital in mediated social networks, and has benefitted from the exceptional research conducted by the PEW Internet and American Life Project on the impact of the Internet on the strength of social ties and exchanges of social capital, which has generated an impressive series of studies on American Internet users. Their most recent report on social networks however looks broadly at Internet use, without distinguishing between mobile and desktop Internet access within interpersonal communications, and tends to focus on e-mailing and SNS activity such as use of Facebook. Other scholarly work on American audiences also reflects these dominant modes of mediated communication (Norris 2004; Ellison et. al 2011). These works provide an interesting starting point for operationalizing key concepts in studies of social networks in China, as well as contextualizing my findings from this participant group within broader trends among American Internet users. More specifically, the empirical portion of this thesis will draw from the now commonly used distinction between a network of core (or strong) ties, and a network of significant (or weak) ties (Granovetter 1973; Pew Internet Project 2006).

Considering the potential of *Weixin* to contribute to heterogeneous networks, and the communicatory utility model of "masspersonal" communication, how can we view the potential of new communication platforms such as *Weixin* as mobilizing structures for contentious collective action? If we are to view *Weixin* as part of a more integrated terrain of masspersonal communication that enables simultaneous consumption, repetition, inference, and retention of media messages while interacting with one's social network, or in Castell's theory of mass self-communication, which has reorganized communication in a network society, I would argue that this multi-functional platform

amplifies the potential for both existing and new interpersonal ties to converge around common interests resulting in subsequent impacts on social capital.

Discussion of Findings

Strong Ties and Proximity

The respondents in this study generally agreed that *Weixin* helped them increase their contact with core ties within their network (strong ties), and helped reinforce existing relationships (see Figure 1). This reflects existing literature on the effect of mobile phones in strengthening solidarity in our closest relationships with family and peer groups, leading to closer cohesion in small groups through mediated ritual interaction (Ling 2008).[18] Respondents 3 and 7 both explained that they felt *Weixin* to be particularly useful in resolving conflicts with their closest contacts, something they did not feel comfortable doing through direct communication:

> "Some things are hard to say face to face. Like maybe I made a mistake, or did something wrong, so I prefer to say sorry or explain this on *Wechat*. And when they feel less angry, I'll talk to them face to face. Because when people are angry, it's hard to explain, they won't listen to us, but [on *Wechat*] they will see the [text] message." *(Respondent 3)*

> "I have a friend, we had a little fight, and I don't want to talk to her face to face so we talked on *Weixin*, it's better for us. And on *Weixin*, we can not only send text, we can also choose voice messages. So we can talk to each other, but not face to face. When there are some difficult things to tell each other, we can choose *Weixin*, use voice messages, and we don't meet each other but we can still talk." *(Respondent 7)*

For these two users, the voice and text-based messaging can allow them to resolve their conflicts in a way that direct communication cannot. Respondent 7 added further that after settling such conflicts through *Weixin* voice chats, she was able to continue communicating with this friend through existing group chats, thereby reinforcing the relationship further in their broader network.

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[18] Inerestingly, Ling (2010) argues that the mobile phone's facilitation of close relationships comes at the expense of those who are physically present with us.

Respondent 3 offered an interesting use of *Weixin* to mend what she thought was a severed tie with her best friend. She was able to use the SNS and chat functions of *Weixin* to reconnect, and become even closer:

"[…] Last year I added him to *Wechat* and he posted a lot of things, photos. Because of the two years [apart], the relationship is not as close as before. And I thought maybe it's hard for us to get back together. But everything he posts is about the time we were both in middle school. I recalled a lot of memories, so I left my comments, and said call me when you come back, I want to see you again. And when he came back from Singapore to Beijing, we got together […] and it was like we were back as before. And maybe we're closer than before. It's because we don't talk to each other a lot, and for me, I thought maybe he forgot about me, and he made other friends. But in fact, he didn't forget me. And from *Wechat*, we know that both of us remembered each other. It was a very good way for us to recall memories and fix our relationship."

Reconnecting as well as maintaining ties in proximity-based relationships with *Weixin* was described by many of the respondents. As the respondents are all highschool students in Beijing, many have older friends who were former classmates who have since gone abroad or elsewhere in China to attend university, and many are non-native to Beijing. Most respondents indicated that they participated in a chat group with former classmates in the past six months (See Figure 9). A number of respondents referenced use of *Weixin* to maintain such ties, including re-connecting with middle-school classmates, reflecting existing literature on the use of SNS to maintain proximity-based relationships after proximity is removed and the cost of maintenance of the relationship increases (Ellison et al. 2011, 137)

The modes of contact in this core group are quite varied, with respondents utilizing multiple forms of mediated communication in conjunction with direct face-to-face contact. However, aside from direct contact, phone calls and instant messaging were the most commonly used, while SNS, microblogging, and e-mailing were not commonly used by respondents with their strong (See Figure 2). The same is true of respondents' weak ties, though this will be discussed in the next section.

Virnoche and Marx's (1997) typology of virtual and real communities is useful in making sense of the types of networks the respondents are engaging with through *Weixin*. The typology distinguishes between three types of community forms:

1. *community networks* of actors that share the same geographical space regularly

2. *virtual extensions* of real intermittent communities in which actors share the same geographical space intermittently

3. *virtual communities* are characterized by actors who are potentially anonymous to one another and engage in purely mediated forms of interaction

The *Weixin*-mediated social networks of the respondents in this study can be best categorized as virtual extensions of real intermittent communities. These relationships are integral to the distribution and reception of information in illiberal regimes. In China's current media environment that combines both a highly strategic state-controlled media machine operating alongside a privatized, though censored, media market (Zhao 2008), the sources of information available to the public are quite varied. However, in times of crisis, mobile communications between established social ties imbue messages with greater credibility than sources reflecting the Party's mass line, and protest respondents are wary of sharing messages with those they do not trust (Liu 2014, 26). This "relational credibility" depends on trust in social ties and influences the reception and distribution of sensitive information.

For these real intermittent communities, *Weixin* offers a way to reinforce connections by exposing existing ties to a wider range of their interests in a way that even regular direct contact does not:

> "When we get together, we don't know what he or she likes to do, because we just go out and talk about things that I myself am interested in. But on *Weixin* and *pengyou quan [Moments]*, we know what he or she is interested in, so we can know them better." (Respondent 1)

This function of *Weixin* – providing greater access to other's personal interests or activities – contributes to the development of weak ties as well, which will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Trust, Control and Change

Findings from the questionnaire show modest support for *Weixin's* impact on the aspect of trust in mediated communication, as just over half of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that *Weixin* helped them build trust in their relationships (see Figure 3). Respondent 13 explained that *Weixin* allowed him to stay up to date with his friends' daily lives and interests, thereby contributing to the maintenance of existing ties, but that his contacts on *Weixin* are friends that he already trusts. These findings suggest that *Weixin* is perceived to be a useful platform for users to solidify their existing trusting relationships. The matter of trust in one's *Weixin* network was raised in relation to acts of self-expression, which will be discussed in the next chapter concerning privacy. However, I believe further inquiry into this aspect of mediated communication through direct methods of inquiry such as interviewing would be required to obtain a better understanding of the particular processes of building trust that *Weixin* has an impact on. Additionally, what is not known is how trusted ties support information diffusion within *Weixin*. For instance, the impact of relational credibility on reception of information through one's *Weixin* network relative to that which is received through mass media channels, or microblogs is a highly relevant matter when it comes to the socializing and decision-shaping aspects of mobilizing structures, a matter that was not directly explored in this questionnaire.

Valenzuela et. al. (2009, 878) suggest that researchers treat social trust – the belief that others will not intentionally seek to harm us – as an attitude that changes throughout one's life, and argue that use of social network sites such as Facebook can have a positive and reciprocal relationship with social trust. As social media use allows us to learn more about our contacts, it may lead users to remove people from their network who are judged to be untrustworthy, leaving us with a social network that is comprised of more trustworthy contacts, facilitating greater use of the SNS. *Weixin* arguably allows for greater refinement of social networks, beginning as it usually does with one's own network of direct contacts, and for some users building upwards towards one's broader network of weak ties, and new ties (to be discussed in the next section). Control over who is added to one's *Weixin* network was commonly referenced throughout the questionnaire's open responses. Respondent 12 offered an interesting perspective when

asked if he felt he could express himself freely in private one-to-one and group chats, he answered:

> "Not really, actually I don't trust anyone, so do I believe that I have freedom to express myself? No some people are watching every word you say and they are looking for any chance to take you down." *(Respondent 12)*

Thus, for this user, the replicability, searchability, persistence and imagined audience (Boyd 2010, 2) of this mediated form of communication may be a further hindrance to the establishment of trusting relationships. However, he described having greater control of his network when asked if he felt he had freedom to express himself in the Moments section of *Weixin*:

> "Yes, because I blocked some people who I think is 'not my style.'" (*Respondent 12*)

Control and change are two distinct characteristics of the mobile social networks of today (Castells and Fernández-Ardèvol 2007, 249). While applications such as *Weixin* are typically used to reinforce one's existing network and supplement face-to-face interactions or replace conventional mobile SMS, the multi-functional *Weixin* offers users the ability to maintain constant connectivity with an evolving social network that one exercises control over to varying degrees. More importantly, this platform seems to offer users significantly more control over their network than other popular communication platforms, such as RenRen.com. Respondent 7 expressed discomfort at being able to be found through this popular SNS, which requires the use of real identities and complete school histories. She explained:

> "I know *Ren Ren* is a very good website but I don't use it a lot. I know you can find all your classmates and everyone can talk to each other. I don't like this. Like everyone can see your friends, and they just want to know what you are doing. I don't want to talk to them. I can add them, but it's not very comfortable. Even if I'm doing good, or bad, I don't want them to know [...] If you have close friends, just talk to them on *Weixin*. If you are close friends with them, why do you want them to look at your [Ren Ren] site?" *(Respondent 7)*

Thus, the ease with which users can find one another on a more public SNS site makes control over one's network more limited. Thus, it seems that users navigate such differences in searchability of their profiles and friend lists by carrying their more intimate network of friends over to *Weixin*, where profiles do not require verified identities, cannot be easily searched, and where they may take the initiative in adding others to their network.

Furthermore, half of the respondents felt that *Weixin* helped them increase the number of people in their core network, people with whom they reported engaging in mutual acts of help (See Figure 4). The average size of their network of strong ties was 77, which should be interpreted in light of their current life stage as high school students engaged in daily interaction with a large number of peers. Whether *Weixin* is used with all core ties is unclear, however the respondents perceive such ties to be "very close"[19], and *Weixin* as facilitating an increase in this number. While there are no comparable statistics for the size of networks in China, the most recent large-scale research into that of American Internet users measures networks at an average of 23 strong ties, and 27 weak ties (Pew 2006, vi). Disaggregated data by age is not available, though the median age of those with "large core networks" (22 or more ties) is younger than that of those with "small" (0-10) and "medium-sized" (11-21) core networks.

The multi-functionality of *Weixin* reflects the shift in modern communications towards what Castells (2012) describes as "mass self-communication". And while the architecture of *Weixin* enables such an affordance, the respondents in this study appear to engage in more atomized communications through this platform. Respondents engaged in a fairly high number of group chats (a mean of 21 different active group chats), and the individual and group chatting functions were prioritized ahead of the SNS functions for all but 4 respondents, with some students claiming that they do not use the SNS function often. In fact, even competing SNS sites such as RenRen.com were ranked lower in the respondents' preference of various digital platforms (See Figure 5), and very few students reported using such stand-alone SNS or microblogs to interact with either

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[19] The definition suggested in the questionnaire for "very close" people were "those you trust, those you discuss important matters with, regularly keep in touch with, or are there for you when you need help."

their strong or weak ties (See Figure 2). Although most students do use the "broadcast" function that allows users to send a message to any number of people from among their *Weixin* contacts, it ranked among the least popular of the functions, which include the location-based "shake" function that enables one to find users in one's geographic proximity, and "drift," the virtual message-in-a-bottle function.

Many respondents reported using *Weixin's* chat and SNS functions to share articles with others, and to a lesser extent, share their own opinions, engage in discussions, and share media created by others and themselves (See Figure 5). These findings suggest that respondents engage in self-production and sharing with their network of contacts on *Weixin*, while reporting very low usage of microblogs and SNS as forums for interaction with either their weak or strong ties. Thus, activity on those platforms may not be significant to maintaining interaction with weak or strong ties.

Respondent 8 presented somewhat more distinct views on her *Weixin* usage. She is a keen user of both microblogging and *Weixin*. She ranked her preference for microblogging above *Weixin*, though she was a highly active *Weixin* user, reporting that she used it several times an hour. In response to Question 12, "Do you believe you have freedom to express yourself freely about any topic when you chat with people using *Weixin*?" she answered:

> "No. Actually I won't express myself on *Weixin*, because people who I am chatting with on *Wexin* are my family and friends in daily life. These people are close to me in my real life, but most of them don't have the same hobbies as me. I can talk about real life problems or funny things with them, but I will talk [about] my own interests with other friends on *Weibo* or Twitter." *(Respondent 8)*

And in response to the same question in regards to activity on *Weixin's* Moments section, Respondent 8 answered:

> "No. I do share a lot of photos or updates about my own life in the Moments section, but I won't put any stars' photos on it. That's because some of my classmates don't like my idol, so I don't want them to see him and feel uncomfortable. All of us focus more on the real life instead of the common interests."

Respondent 8 was referring primarily to her interest in subcultures such as Japanese animation and the practice of *cosplay*, a hobby she uses to expand her network through other platforms such as microblogs and Instagram, a photo-sharing social media application. Meanwhile, another user expressed a similar regard for the feelings of existing ties in response to the same question:

> "No, I do not really think so. People are so different than each other. I have to consider other people's feeling when I say something to them." *(Respondent 3)*

Thus, the ways in which *Weixin* is embedded into respondents' existing "real world" network can be a considerable constraint on self-expression on this platform. Although most respondents who felt a constraint on their self-expression focused on considerations of government surveillance (discussed in Chapter 4), a small number such as Respondents 3 and 8 above focused on their need to consider the feelings of their existing ties. Nonetheless, most students felt that they could express themselves freely through their private group and one-to-one chats, though less so with their Moments activity. In fact, the reason a few students felt free to do so was because they felt *Weixin* was a more comfortable means of communication than direct contact in some circumstances. Interestingly, for Respondent 8, communicating in a more public platform (Twitter and Weibo) with a different subsection of friends (and arguably a less clearly defined audience) was a less constraining space for self-expression, as the ability to communicate with like-minded individuals who share common interests is what characterizes this space, rather than the likelihood of state surveillance or its public-ness.

In light of Passy's (2003) three functions of social ties in mobilizing participants, the use of *Weixin* to reinforce existing ties that constrain self-expression would suggest that core networks mediated by *Weixin* are not conducive to engaging in the socializing function of networks, a process that would depend on greater diffusion of a more diverse range of information and issues. In fact, most respondents agreed that *Weixin* increased their contact with people who shared their opinions, indicating greater contact with people of a similar sort (See Figure 7). Strong ties with a homogenous network is a strong predictor of bonding social capital, which could include emotional support, access

to limited or scarce resources, ability to mobilize solidarity, and yields out-group antagonism (Williams 2006, 601). This participant group's support for the use of *Weixin* to maintain contact and build trust with core ties, and even to some extent increasing the number of these strong, core ties (See Figure 8) would suggest that *Weixin* positively contributes to the maintenance and expansion of a larger core of trusted individuals. In the context of China's illiberal regime and unorganized interests, such ties are essential to both the structural-connection function and decision-shaping function of networks in mobilizing participants to contentious collective action (Passy 2003), providing both opportunities and social incentives to participation, though not necessarily contributing to the socialization process of mobilization.

Expanded and Atomized Networks

Returning to Respondent 8's comments, she explained that she does not share interests with her core ties but prefers to discuss "real life problems", reflecting consistency with bonding capital that typically characterizes one's interactions with their closest friends and family. Rather than seeking information and access to a variety of opinions from this core group, it is social support that such ties offer (Putnam 2000). The "other friends" that Respondent 8 speaks of who she interacts with through *Weibo* and Twitter seems to indicate exchange of bridging capital among weaker ties through the discussion of a broader range of personal interests. When asked if she felt that *Weixin* allowed her to interact with people whom she shared common interests with, she explained:

> "I use these two apps for different circles in my life. People in my real life like my classmates, middle school, high school, and even primary school. We find each other on *Weixin*. So when we want to hang out, we text each other using *Weixin*. But I also have many online friends. Like maybe we don't know exactly who you are, [if] you're a boy or a girl, but you have the same hobbies and you can share your hobbies, and discuss it. So you can use *Weibo*. Because *Weibo* is an app that lets people make friends. Doesn't matter who you are or where you come from, you feel very close because you have the same things you like and you can discuss them and share pictures and music. That's bigger than *Weixin*. *Weixin* is like the small circle of your life." *(Respondent 8)*

Respondent 8 described quite a strategic and complex use of her repertoire of social media tools to manage relationships based on the different purposes of sharing

common interests and emotional support. She also explained that in her experience, the maintenance of distinct circles within her network using different communication platforms allowed her to develop her identity with greater complexity and ultimately, greater adaptability. In discussing the potential for *Weibo* or *Weixin* to allow people to alienate themselves from others by decreasing their direct contact, she explained that like all other forms of mediated communication, *Weixin* can be used with microblogging to bring balance and diversity to one's own social network, and identity:

> "You have to handle both sides, you have to make well your little circle with your close friends, and then you can [also] have many online friends. Then your life will be much more complex, with many different sides. You see the world in many different ways, and in different circles, you are a different you. Because a person can have may different sides also. I think this app should help people to easily change between the circles. Not just close you in a circle […]."

And although this atomized approach to her social network broadens her network to groups that cut across age groups and social backgrounds, and provides a greater range of information and opinions, this expanded network is not entirely limited in yielding only bridging capital. At different times, Respondent 8 engages her broader *Weibo* circle in interactions that yield exchanges of bonding capital such as advice. She describes seeking this resource from this more diverse circle precisely because of their greater range of experiences:

> "Also sometimes I have trouble with my real friends, like the person who sits at the same table with me in class. We are very good friends. But sometimes we have troubles and I will talk to my friends on the Internet, like [asking] what advice do you have. Because some of them are older than me, so they can give me some real good advice. In my little circle on *Weixin*, we are all classmates, and we are the same age, but on *Weibo*, some people have more experiences than you, they experience a different life, and are more mature than me and they can give me some real good advice." *(Respondent 8)*

She further explained that many of these relationships have since evolved into quite close friendships and that they have had direct contact. This comment suggests a more

heterogeneous group of both strong and weak ties for this particular netizen through the use of microblogs, and the exclusive use of *Weixin* to reinforce her network of core ties that provide emotional support and interaction more grounded in daily life. Her comment also suggests that *Weixin*, or how it is used at least, does not offer her opportunities to learn of others' personal interests. However, when used in conjunction with the Internet, she and other users have shown greater initiative in the use of *Weixin* to seek out and communicate with a more heterogeneous group of people based on a shared interest. Similarly, Respondent 1 described an experience using *Weixin* to expand his network based on a hobby:

> "[...] I built a chat group which is about skateboard[ing]. I invite many friends and strangers. I shared my chat group number on [the] internet." *(Respondent 1)*

He further elaborated in an interview that he has maintained contact with many of these new friends, and was able to develop a good relationship with a few of them. Respondent 15 similarly displayed a greater propensity to use both *Weixin* and other Internet platforms to create new ties with a more diverse range of individuals. He reported having five "somewhat close" and five "very close" friends who he met online, and three "somewhat close" and three "very close friends" who he met through *Weixin*. He also answered positively to the question of whether or not *Weixin* helped him interact with people of a different social background (Appendix A, Question 15), adding that he made many friends who are "office workers." Of the eight respondents who answered positively to the question of whether or not *Weixin* helped them interact with people who shared their interests, a variety of reasons were given. Not unlike Respondent 1, Respondent 16 explained that *Weixin* allowed him to create a group chat with those he felt he shared common interests with, while Respondent 14 answered that being able to see her friends' activities in the Moments section of *Weixin* allowed her to interact with them by responding to their posts, and gave her the freedom to send them messages whenever she wanted. Similarly, Respondent 7 explained that sharing videos and photos through *Weixin* facilitated interaction with individuals who shared her interests. Interestingly, Respondent 11 agreed with the statement in saying:

"Of course, only people with the same interests are able to have a consistent chatting relationship."

Of those who did not find *Weixin* helped them interact with individuals with whom they shared interests, the common reason cited was that *Weixin* was only used to interact with people they already knew, and not "new friends" or "strangers." Thus, the assumption seems to be that their network of existing direct relationships are not meant to share interests with them, and that interacting with others who have common interests would require seeking new ties. Furthermore, most students believed that *Weixin* did not have an impact on their contact with people of a different social background (11 of the 16 respondents felt no impact in this regard).

So while some respondents restrict their use of *Weixin* to an intimate group of core ties or those that do not share their broader interests, others use the group chat and SNS functions in order to more easily find common ground with their existing ties, while others actively use *Weixin* in conjunction with other Internet platforms to broaden their network beyond their direct contacts and perhaps cutting across boundaries of age, life stages, and proximity, yielding greater bridging capital through these weak ties (Putnam 2000; Granovetter 1973). For those with more active uses of a wider variety of social media, *Weixin* seems to be just one tool among many that facilitates the creation of clearly compartmentalized "circles" larger networks.

Weak Ties, Heterogeneous Backgrounds, and Information-sharing

Respondents were evenly split on whether or not they used *Weixin* to make "new connections" with unknown persons, with half the respondents agreeing that they make new friends (as either "online friends" or "real world friends") through *Weixin*. They reported a positive effect using *Weixin* to expand their networks of acquaintances and weak ties (the latter was described in the questionnaire as "somewhat close people"), and to a lesser extent, expanding their strong ties (described in the questionnaire as "very close people").

This expanded network of weak ties and acquaintances is primarily rooted in respondents' real world interactions, however nine of the sixteen respondents reported

having people in their core and significant ties who they met through either *Weixin* or the Internet. These nine respondents reported having an average of three "very close" friends whom they met on the Internet, and a smaller subset of six respondents reported having an average of four "very close" friends whom they met through *Weixin*. One outlier is not included in this average, Respondent 9, as he reported having an unusually high number of "very close" Internet friends[20] (25) within a fairly large core network of 199 "very close" friends, though he did not provide any greater detail regarding the nature of these Internet friends within his core network. Interestingly, Respondent 9 did not report any ties with individuals he met through *Weixin*, and reported "no increase" in all three categories of his social network (very close, somewhat close, and acquaintances). This would suggest a very distinct difference in this respondent's use of the Internet and *Weixin*, with use of the former as a point of contact for expanding his network of strong ties, (and to a lesser extent his network of weak ties) and the latter only to communicate with a very large network of people he describes as those he "already knows". Nonetheless, while a small number of respondents reported using *Weixin* as a first point of contact in adding a handful of core ties to their network, the application was described by respondents predominantly as a tool for interacting with one's pre-existing interpersonal network. Certainly these findings must be reconciled with the possibility that respondents interpreted the concept of "new connections" in Question 15 differently:

Q15: Have you made new connections with people using *Weixin* (for example, become online friends, become real world friends, send e-mails or chat together)?

While the question was intended to understand the use of *Weixin* to add to one's network through *Weixin* as the point of contact, and to extend this contact into what the user would describe as part of their social network, I did not intend to draw a very clear distinction between "online" and "offline" friends. Surveys in the field of communications that overemphasize the dichotomous distinction between online/offline

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[20] I use the term "Internet friends" to denote those whom respondents met through the Internet, meaning that the Internet was their initial point of contact. This differs from the Chinese term "*wangyou*" which would describe friendships that begin and exist primarily in an online medium.

spaces in how individuals meet or where there relationship is conducted may not be appropriate for the complex communication ecology that individuals are immersed in today (Ellison et al. 2011, 126). Thus, this survey question was designed to account for individual understandings of this complexity, while only locating *Weixin* as a point of contact regardless of the type of online/offline relationship that emerges.

Interviews with Respondents 3, 7 and 8 revealed more active uses of *Weixin* in conjunction with the Internet to expand their networks of weak ties. Respondents 3 and 7's experiences yielded exchanges of bridging capital, while Respondent 8 developed some such ties into what she described as very close relationships, yielding both bridging and bonding capital (as described in the previous section). This group of students are all high school students just months away from moving to various Canadian cities to attend university. As such, Respondents 3 and 7 explained that they, along with their peers, were part of *Weixin* chat groups (with approximately 30 users) that they found through Internet search engines, chat groups that support incoming Chinese students at Canadian universities. Such groups are very informal, and described by the two students as very good resources for getting help and meeting new friends:

> "I already made five friends, two of them are already in their third year and three of them are new students. [On Moments] I found their photos, and from their photos, I saw for example this girl [who looked] really nice. And I added her and she told me she's from Dongbei province, and that we are in the same faculty. We talked to each other, and we found that we have the same interests, and are in the same courses and we became friends. And then there was another one and another one." *(Respondent 3)*

> "There's a student who established this group and he added some students. And if I add this friend, I can join this group, and we can get to know each other. We can talk about who received an offer, and who arrived first, and who can take us to [the University] Maybe we see that we both grew up in Beijing, the same area, or some common interest. […] I can send them a private message, and I say maybe we can meet each other and talk face to face. This is an easy way for us to know each other before we meet face to face. *(Respondent 7)*

While *Weixin* can be used in combination with the Internet to first make contact with new ties, it can also be used to be more selective in choosing who they engage in one-to-one chats with from these large chat groups and build closer ties with. As evident from the

comments above, the chat and SNS functions facilitate the discovery of common interests and backgrounds. However, Respondent 3 explained that she was able to use the SNS function to determine more contacts who she believed would *not* be appropriate new ties. She explained that she was particularly put off by those she saw posting heavily on Moments about their consumption of clothing and other material goods. Furthermore, Respondent 7 explained that she befriended those she judged to be "kind" from their profiles, and preferred to get closer with those she judged to be "good students," which she determined by their level of Moments activity. Those with many postings on this SNS section of *Weixin*, and those who posted many photos of outings at bars were unlikely to be good students and desirable new ties for her, in addition to those whose postings offended her:

> "[I didn't like that] they used dirty words. Also we can see their photos. On *Weixin*, we can know their lives. We can go to their *pengyouquan* [Moments section]. We can add them as a friend first, and see what they're like." *(Respondent 7)*

So it seems that as *Weixin* can be used by self-initiated Internet users to expand their networks and even yield bridging capital during life transitions, the integrated SNS function in *Weixin* also allows users to be more discerning in who they add to their network of weak ties from larger anonymous groups on *Weixin*. Common hometown or regions, interests, and attitudes are significant factors in selecting new ties, information that can be garnered to some extent through *Weixin's* SNS function.

This participant group as a whole shows evidence of the use of *Weixin* to foster their network of strong and weak ties, though not necessarily building a more heterogeneous network. While *Weixin* users predominantly perceive their audience to be those that they already know offline, users do not show a great propensity to use multi-functional instant messaging as a way to diversify their network. Users did not report significant interaction with a heterogeneous network through *Weixin,* as most did not find that *Weixin* helped them interact with people of a different social background (Question 17). While five of the respondents did feel *Weixin* helped them interact with people of a different social background, their reasons and uses were varied. As previously mentioned, one student used *Weixin* to make new friends who were office workers, and

another felt *Weixin* allowed her to be get exposure to, and become accepting of other cultures, thus exhibiting some bridging social capital. Respondent 14 explained that *Weixin* allowed her to simply type messages to those of a different social background rather than interacting directly, adding that she felt more "relaxed" sending messages than speaking face-to-face with such individuals. Thus, for a small number of respondents in this study, *Weixin's* affordances in facilitating interaction with a more heterogeneous network of weak ties that cross social boundaries are realized in this participant group. These same users also agreed or strongly agreed that *Weixin* helped them interact with people who they believed to be very different from themselves (See Figure 10). Whether this yields greater bridging social capital requires further inquiry, though respondents did report engaging in reciprocal acts of help, with more respondents engaging in "bonding" capital exchanges, such as help with basic needs, emergencies, and providing advice (See Figure 4). Nonetheless, the majority of respondents expressed disinterest in meeting "strangers" of a different social background:

> "I mainly use *Weixin* to chat with my classmates and real life friends, so their backgrounds are similar to me." (Respondent 8)

> "I didn't make any new friends on *Weixin*. I don't use the functions for finding new friends. I only add friends that I knew." (Respondent 2)

These findings are not incompatible with the dominant consensus in the literature on SNS and youth culture that the use of SNS contributes to larger networks of weak ties that build greater bridging social capital (Pew Internet Project 2011; Kwon et al. 2013; Ellison 2011; Ellison 2007 add this one later). While this participant group demonstrated use of *Weixin* to increase the number of weak ties, and showed some limited uses of *Weixin* to interact with a more heterogeneous group of individuals, with a small number of students making or maintaining newly made ties with *Weixin* or the Internet as the initial point of contact, the predominant attitude of most of the respondents was oriented towards bonding with a more homogenous group of close friends and family. Despite the integration of "masspersonal" communication functions in *Weixin*, respondents' use of *Weixin's* social networking and chat functions does not demonstrate a significant amount

of interest in seeking greater access to a more diverse range of social groups or interests through this platform, suggesting that the impact of *Weixin* in mediated interpersonal networks might not yield significant increases in bridging social capital to the extent that conventional SNS and microblogging sites have been found to yield, and thus, may not contribute to the socialization function of networks.

Research on BBS and microblogging in China tends to focus on Internet activism, online discourses, and the common practices of following those that Tai Zixue (2013) categorizes as "A-bloggers" (bloggers who are successful in setting trends, leading debates, attracting attention through blog writing), rather than the particular effects of usage on the composition and dynamics social networks. Such studies have found evidence that BBS and microblogs can yield bridging social capital in heterogeneous online networks through information diffusion and the development of an Internet "ethos", *Weixin* is incorporated into users' communication repertoires quite differently. Despite the fact that social networking, public accounts and mobile instant messaging have merged in *Weixin,* any virtual communities that users may engage with on the Internet are not perceived as appropriate participants in the *Weixin* activities of most users.

Strong Ties, Weak Ties, and Reciprocity

Social ties and social capital are concepts that have long plagued scholars in the fields of political science, sociology and economics, as consistent definitions and appropriate empirical tools for analyzing these concepts continue to be a point of disagreement (Grootaert 2001, 10). Applying these concepts to the case of China is further complicated by the unique cultural and historical practices of *guanxi*, defined roughly as "personal relations." While the term is often used interchangeably with "social ties" (as it is understood in a general Western context) this obscures two important elements of social interactions in the Chinese context, that of reciprocity and longevity. Social ties in a Chinese context are imbued with a culture of mutual reliability and reciprocal obligation that is consciously cultivated and knows no time limitations (Gold et al. 2002, 7). Such obligations and indebtedness is a culture that is replicated and integrated in mobile mediated networks as well (Liu 2014, 20). And with the pervasiveness of mobile

communications in the daily lives for a growing proportion of the population in China today, Liu (2014) has suggested that a distinct concept of "*guanxi*-embedded mobile social network" be applied to the case of China, and has observed the significant influence such ties have on the decision-shaping function (Passy 2003) of social networks in mobilizing respondents to protest activities:

> According to the interviews, when people received mobilization messages via their mobile phones, the messages reminded them on the one hand of their relationship with the senders, and on the one hand of their duties in the social network… In other words, as soon as people received mobilization messages, the first and foremost thing they recognize is not the mobilization initiative. Instead, it is *the relevance of social ties* and *their duties in social relationships*. (Liu 2014, 30, emphasis his).

Liu's methods (single case study with semi-structured interviews via snowball sampling) perfectly capture the nuances of digitally mediated networks in a context of contentious collective action, and demonstrate a research design that is most apt for exploring "why" type research question. The questionnaire employed in this study was not intended to explore the unique and precise ways in which the duties and obligations embedded in practices of *guanxi* might operate in *Weixin*-mediated relationships. Findings from the questionnaire only indicate that the respondents engaged with their core ties in reciprocal acts, such as helping each other with homework through chat groups (See Figure 4), without exploring further the reasons and precise ways in which *Weixin* is involved. Nonetheless, Liu's methods demonstrate a future direction for research on how and why *Weixin* might be used in social capital exchanges in a Chinese context.

These findings on how *Weixin* has become incorporated into this group's communication practices with different parts of their social networks are generalizable to existing literature on the impacts of social media on weak tie networks, and are relevant to understanding how networked action can benefit from the more unique ways in which *Weixin* has altered core networks and their communication practices. However, the limited use of *Weixin* to broaden one's network to more heterogeneous groups and access a greater variety of information and opinions suggests that *Weixin* does not facilitate the socialization of participants that is necessary to mobilization of participants to

contentious collective action (Passy 2003). The increase in the number of and contact with weak ties surely allows for greater access to other resources that can be mobilized in support of a contentious collective act, and can provide opportunities to participate. However in the context of mobilizing contentious collective action in illiberal regimes where networks substitute for a free press and autonomous organizations, networks mediated by *Weixin* may not have greater exposure to subversive information and engagement in contentious conversation. Furthermore, social networks that can operate effectively as mobilizing structures require private communication spaces that enable them to both organize and socialize participants. This function of *Weixin*-mediated networks will be explored in the following chapter.
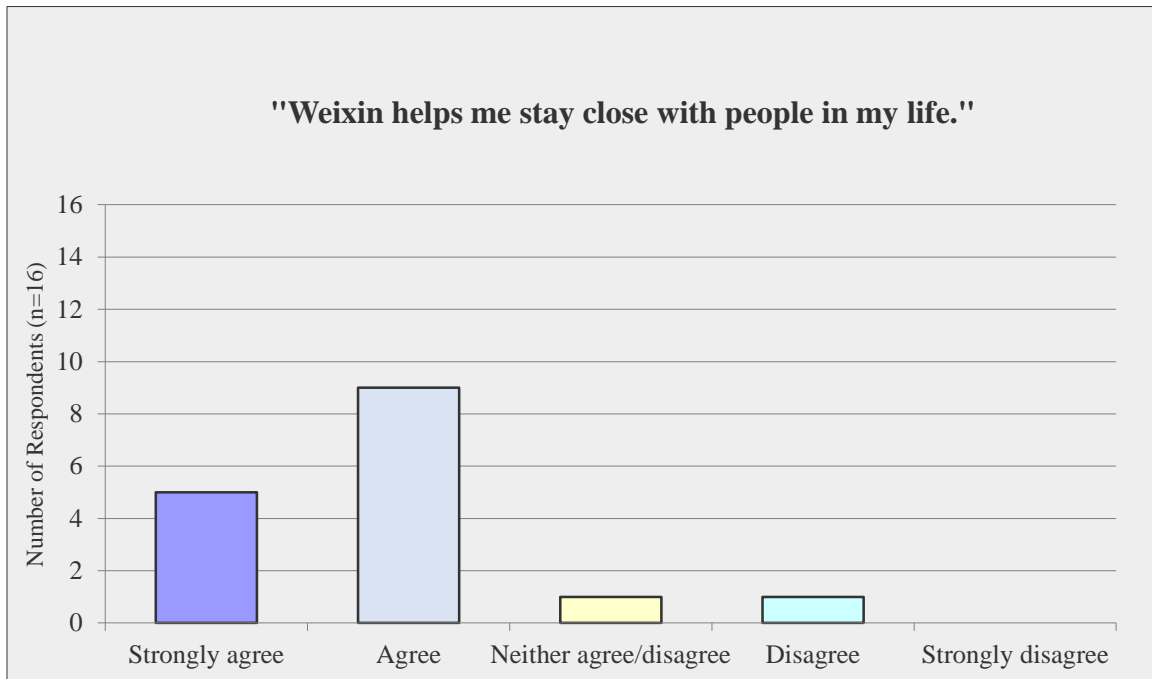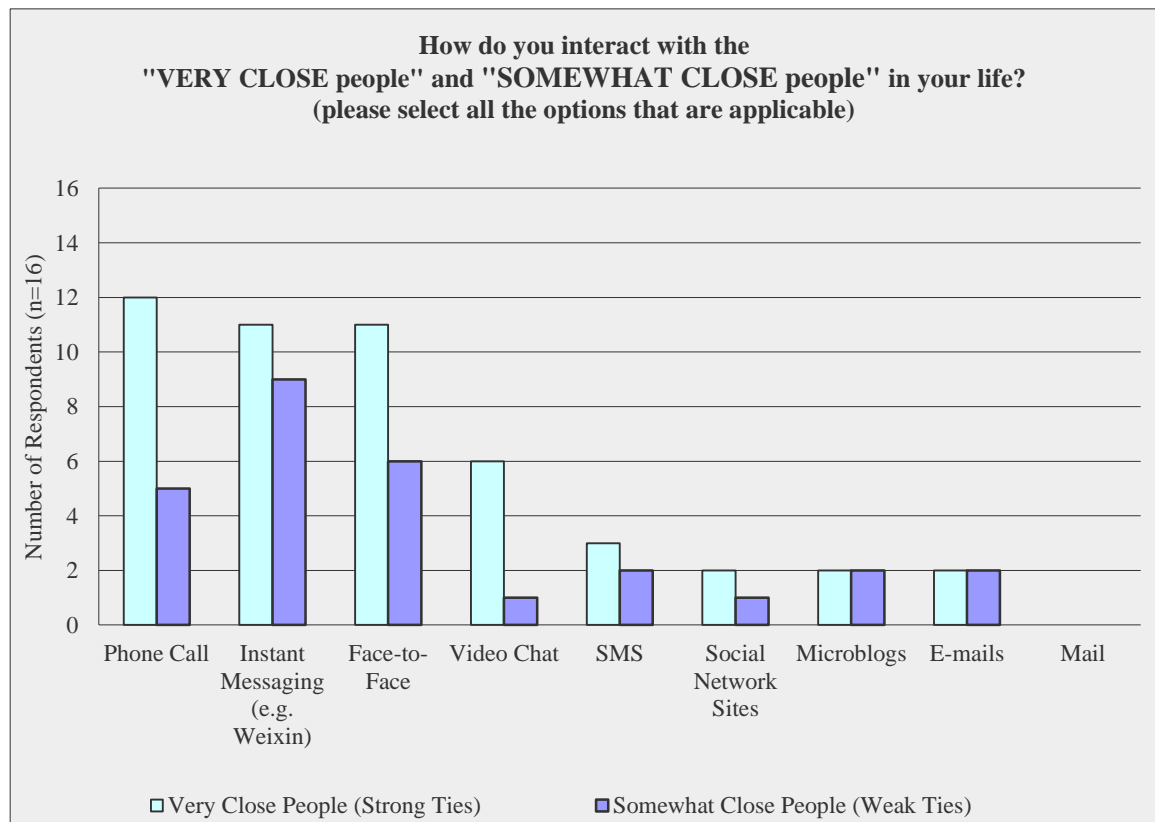
Figure 1: Reinforcing Strong Ties

"Weixin helps me stay close with people in my life."

Figure 2: Media Multiplexity

How do you interact with the
"VERY CLOSE people" and "SOMEWHAT CLOSE people" in your life?
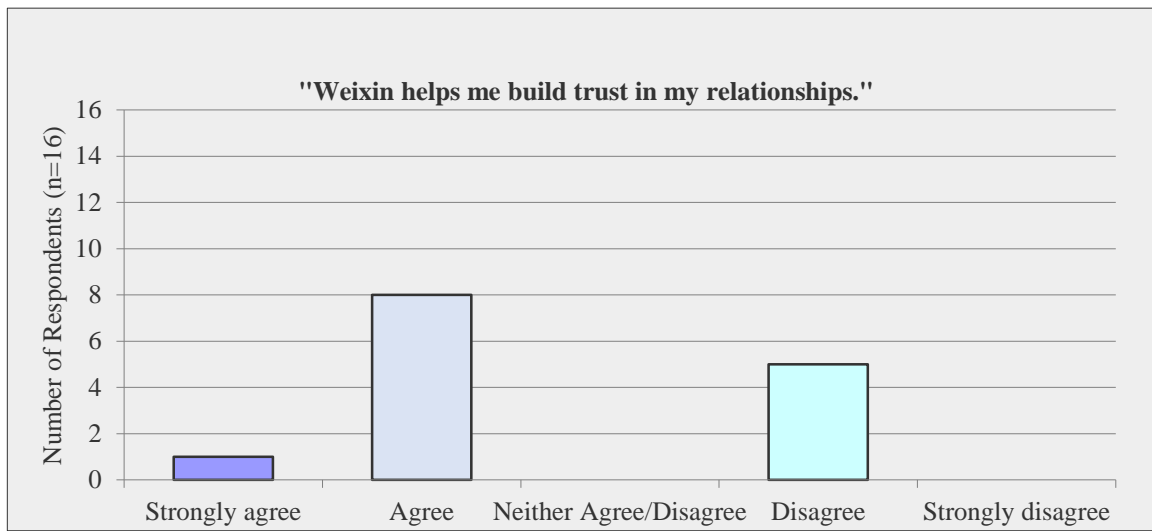(please select all the options that are applicable)

Figure 3 Using *Weixin* to build trust

Figure 4 Reciprocal exchanges of social capital
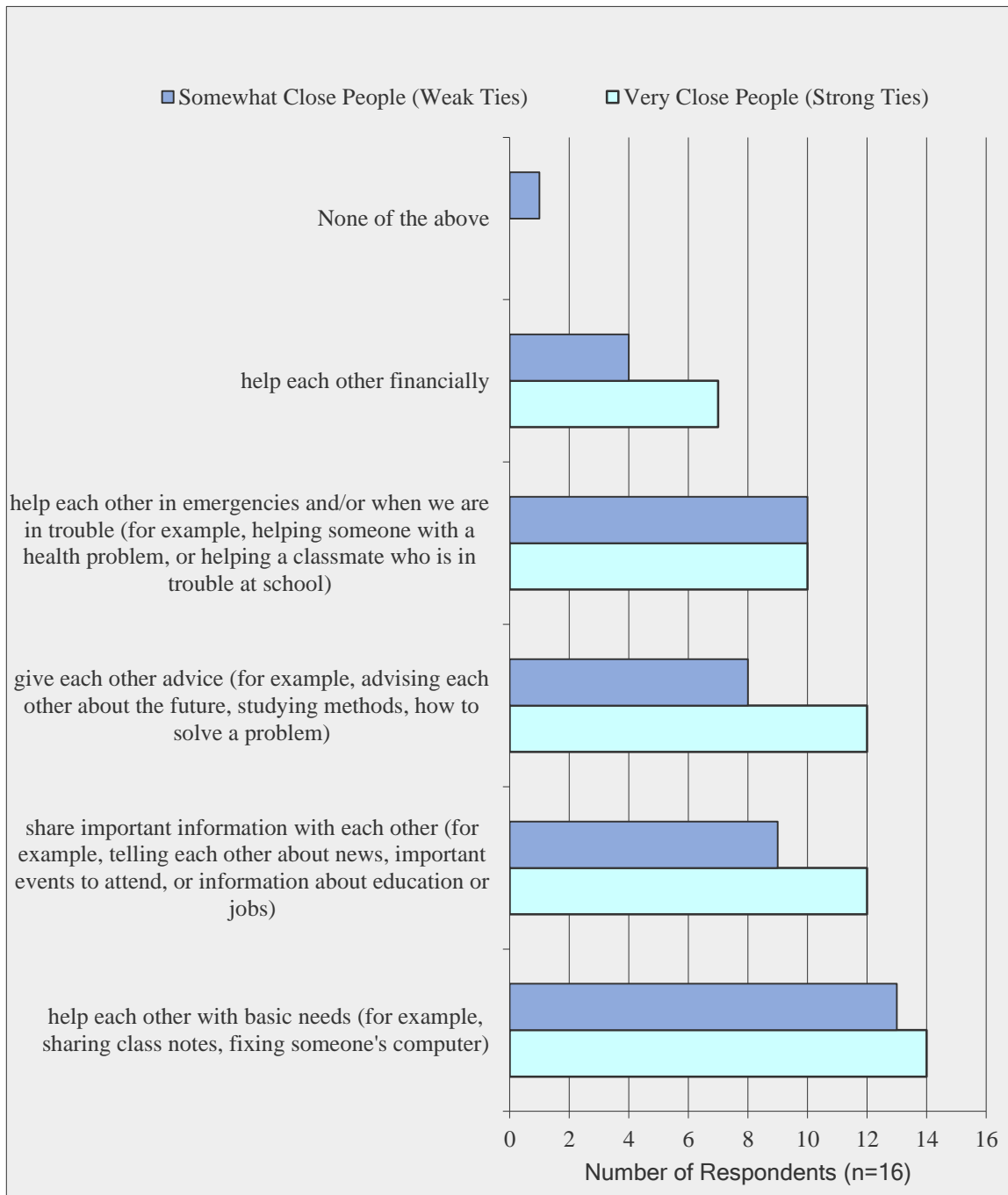
Figure 5: Ranking of communication platforms

Average ranking of websites and mobile apps in order of preference (1 is most preferred)
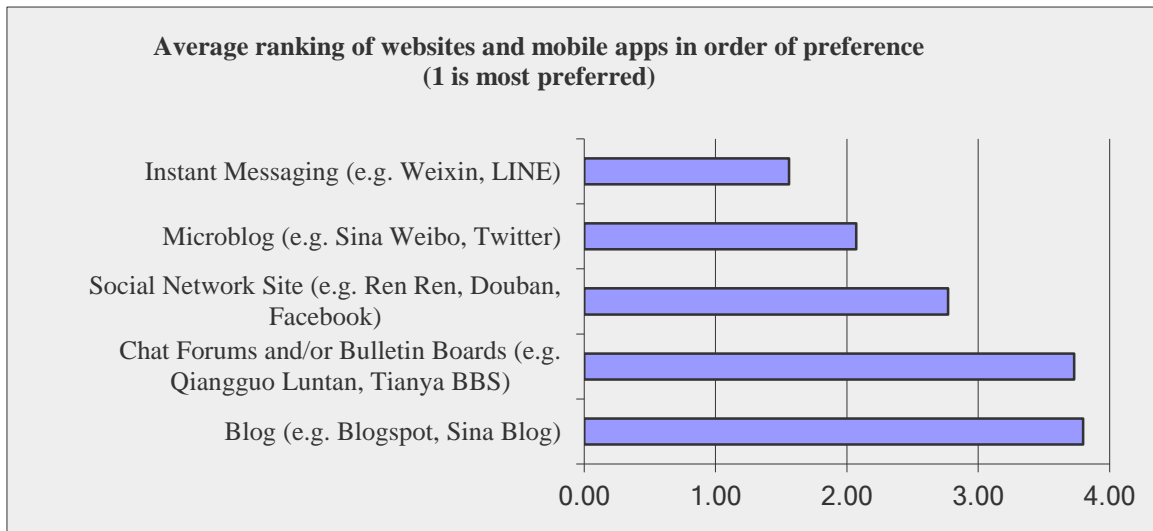
Figure 6: Activity on *Weixin*

Thinking about your Weixin activity (in chats and/or Moments), Please check all the statements that you AGREE with below:
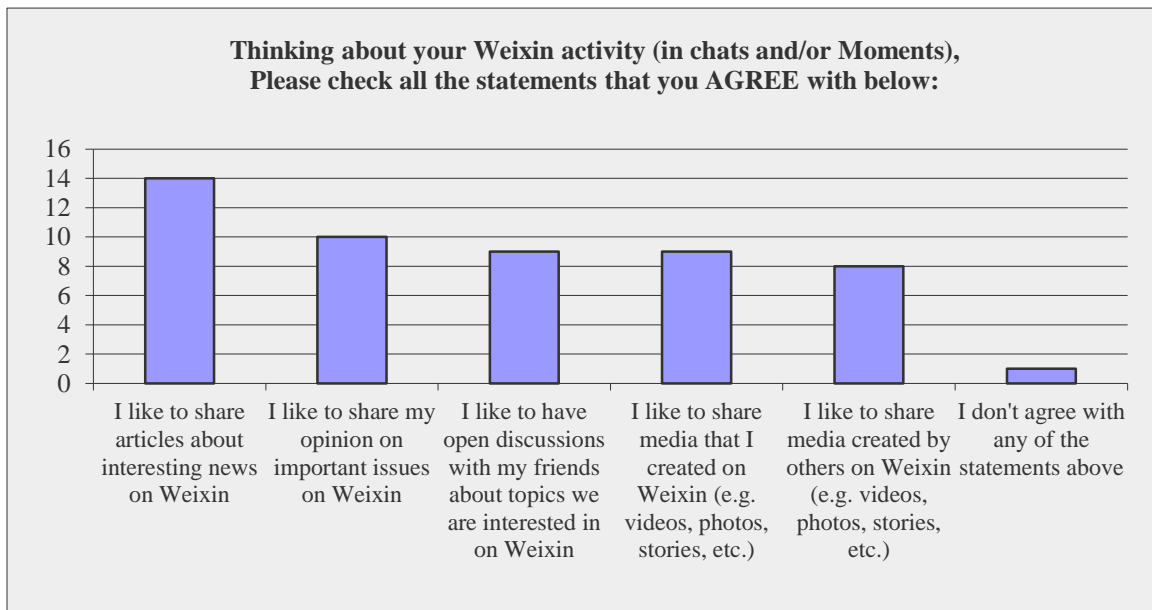
Figure 7: Influence of *Weixin* on Homogeneity of Networks

Has Weixin changed your contact with people who generally share your opinions?

Figure 8: Changes in the size of networks through the use of *Weixin*

Overall, do you think using Weixin has INCREASED, DECREASED, or NOT REALLY AFFECTED:
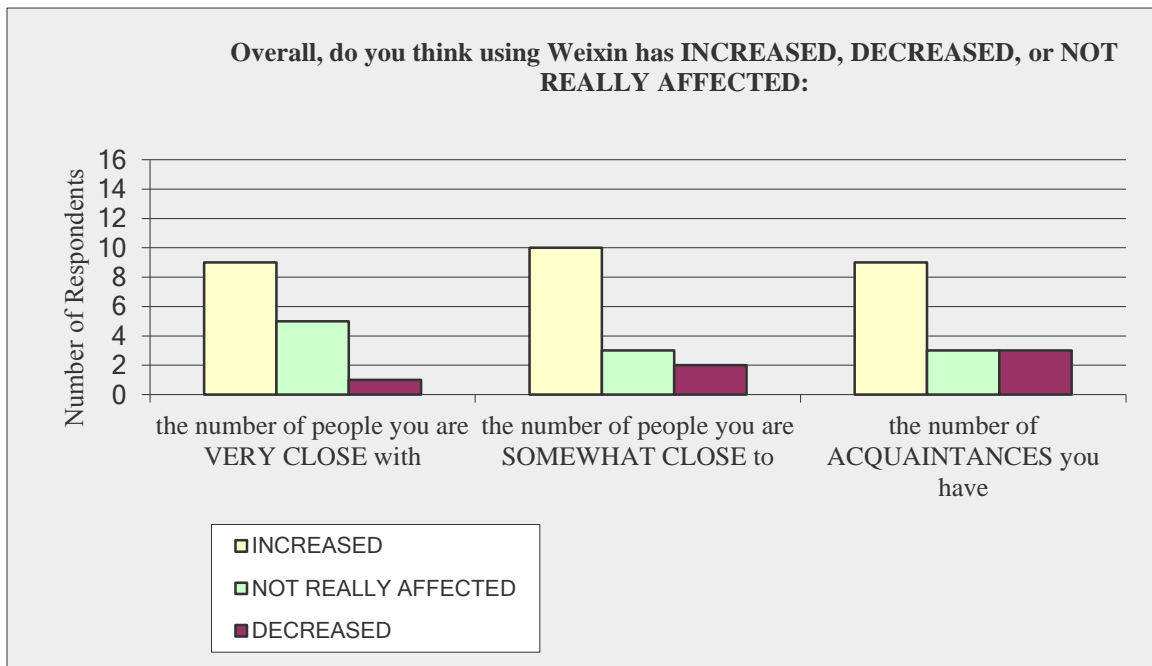
Figure 9: Types of Chat Groups

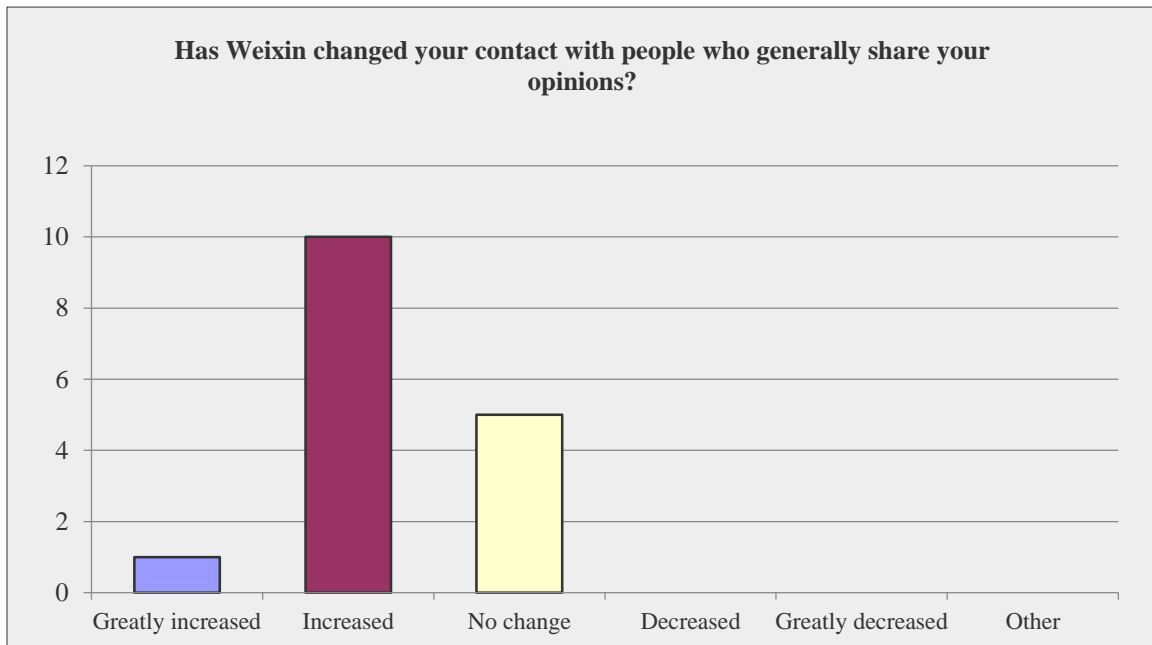**Which types of chat groups (3 or more participants) have you participated in during the past 6 months?**

Type	Number of Respondents (n=16)
a chat group with members of a religious organization	2
a chat group with people you share a common hobby…	4
a chat group with friends from your hometown	5
a chat group with members of an organization or club	7
a chat group with family members	9
a chat group with former classmates	9
a chat group with current classmates	15

Number of Respondents (n=16)

Figure 10: Contact with people of a different sort

"Weixin helps me interact with people who I believe are very different from myself."

Response	Count
Strongly agree	4
Agree	6
Neither agree/disagree	1
Disagree	5
Strongly disagree	0
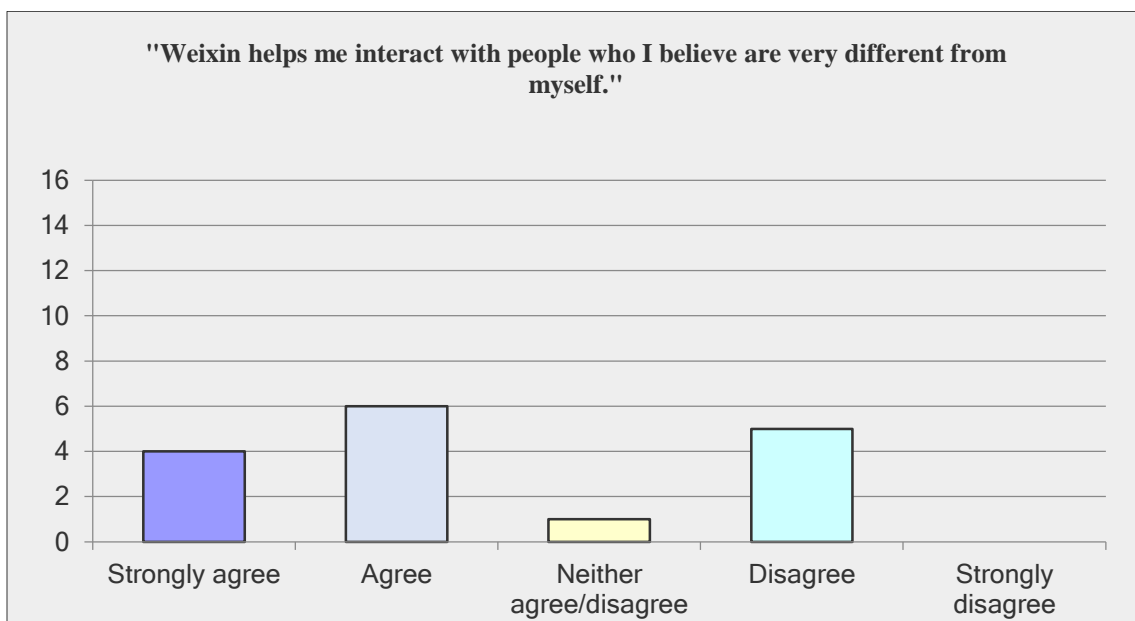
Chapter 4: Privacy and Control

ICT as Weapons of the Weak

One-to-one communication platforms are essential to mobilization in repressive regimes such as China, as studies of mass incidents have shown that participants perceived postings on the Internet to be too risky, and described selecting recipients for a mobilization message as a careful process (Liu 2014, 29). What is remarkable about multi-functional mobile instant messaging platforms such as *Weixin* is the accessibility of these tools for a vast and growing population in China today, and their flexibility to respond to state control. As such, *Weixin* offers a highly convenient and low-cost method of delivering highly targeted mobilization messages through one's network.

SMS-based communication is available to anyone with a mobile phone, and has facilitated the diffusion of illicit information (Yu 2004) and mobilization of interpersonal networks in contentious collective action in China (Liu 2013). However, new multifunctional mobile instant messaging incorporates voice, text, picture and video-based communications with social networking creating a more flexible, digital "weapon of the weak," to use James C. Scott's (1985) powerful imagery. Certainly, the experiences of today's tethered urban youth in China appear vastly different from the forms of peasant resistance Scott observed in Malaysia from 1978 to 1980. However, upon closer inspection, Scott's observations of the "patient, silent struggles" of passive non-compliance, feigned ignorance, and foot-dragging in resistance to onerous new policies is not unlike the use of homonyms for censored subjects, satirical appropriation of CCP themes and language, and any form of individual-based expression that escapes state control. The daily acts of resistance in the village Scott called "Sedaka" should be familiar to China's netizens:

> The struggle between rich and poor in Sedaka is not merely a struggle over work, property rights, grain, and cash. It is also a struggle over the appropriation of symbols, a struggle to identify causes and assess blame, a contentious effort to give partisan meaning to local history. The details of this struggle are not pretty, as they entail backbiting, gossip, character assassination, rude nicknames, gestures, and silences of contempt which, for the most part, are confined to the backstage of village life. In public life - that is to say, in power-laden settings − a carefully calculated conformity prevails for the most part. (xvii)

Although Scott was concerned more with the communally shared meanings that made certain public behaviours, policies, and conditions seem unpleasant, unjust, and unseemly, his observations of the element of control that community members exercised in this backstage of village life is highly relevant to understanding power in mediated communications in contemporary China and the potential impact of *Weixin*.

Can we compare the communication spaces created by users on *Weixin* to a more private backstage where symbols and narratives get rewritten, away from the surveillance of the powerful in public life? If users of *Weixin* exercise control over their consumption of information, and autonomy in sharing and discussing issues freely, *Weixin* could possibly become a backstage platform upon which counterhegemonic struggles can take place, and the CCP's control over the discourse of mediated public spaces can be challenged. Liu (2013) goes a step further to argue that mobile multi-media platforms offer the possibility of influencing government-controlled mass media and promoting transparency in Chinese society. Certainly, the diffusion of information through mobile phone networks during the SARS crisis of 2003 amidst a highly censored mass media supports Liu's assertion (Yu 2004).

Control and Counter-hegemony in "Counterpublics"

Elements of control and autonomy in *Weixin* are most evident if we conceptualize this mediated communication space in terms of what Nancy Fraser has termed "counterpublics." Counterpublics can be broadly described as subaltern spaces for marginalized groups to contest the state's hegemonic control of the broader public sphere, and collectively create their own definitions of their interests, identities, and needs in alternative forms of public expression and political behaviour (Fraser 1992, 61). Western media have certainly shown an enthusiasm in describing *Weixin's* functions in such a light, highlighting the power of *Weixin* in enabling users to communicate not only with one's "real world" interpersonal network, but also activists, community leaders, celebrity bloggers, journalists, alternative media in China, Western media, and so on (Skuse 2014; Wertime 2014). This capability of *Weixin* to connect individuals in counter-hegemonic discourses with their own networks as well as political dissidents, journalists, and potential leaders of resistance in a *mediated,* backstage, counterpublic sphere is a

compelling image. And according to Fraser, subaltern publics or counterpublics always operate alongside a broader, hegemonic public:

> […] in stratified societies, subaltern counterpublics have a dual character. On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides. This dialectic enables subaltern counterpublics partially to offset, although not wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies.

If we are to conceptualize *Weixin* as a space for mediated subaltern publics to form, a space that offers participants a place to withdraw from an alienating, commercialized, and censored Internet, we begin to see the potential for it to operate as a training ground for the agitation activities that Fraser speaks of.

Although little time has passed since the introduction of blogs in China in 2002 (Tai and Zhang 2013), and microblogging in 2007, these spaces can hardly be described as a counterpublic space for "withdrawal and regroupment." As of June 2012, there were approximately 324,525 government *Weibo* accounts (Lu 2013). Though usage rates are high, they seem to have plateaued at approximately 70.7% in the case of blogs, and 45.5% in the case of microblogs (CNNIC 2014)[21]. Meanwhile, the remarkable rise in popularity of *Weixin* over that of microblogging seem to indicate a retreat to a more private (and mobile) sphere of interaction. In this last chapter, I will explore whether or not the private chat and SNS functions of *Weixin* are perceived by users as an arena for interaction that is perceived to be free from state surveillance and censorship practices, and conducive to engaging in self-expression.

In order to understand how the private space of mobile instant messaging might contribute to mobilization in digitally networked action, Papacharissi (2010) offers an interesting contrast between public and private spheres that emphases the element of control in private spaces and its potential for enhancing the "in between bonds" that

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[21] There is no distinction in these statistics on blog users between those who view/post versus create content.

connect individuals not only in public life, but in contentious collective action. Scholarship on Internet use and social capital that takes a less positive view of its effects (Nie 2001) have likened Internet use to the retreat to the home that the television is argued to have caused (Putnam 2000). However, retreat to private interactive spaces such as *Weixin* can be seen as social, and potentially political acts.

> It should be emphasized that the fall of the public individual to domains that are private pertains less to a personal lack of political interest and more to the gradual relocation of political interest in domains that are private, and thus more intimate. Dead public space presents the most concrete reason why 'people seek out on intimate terrain what is denied them on more alien ground,' thus mapping a return to private space in pursuit of the *in between* bonds shared in collective existence […] The problem of public spaces, critics argue, is that they possess *visibility*, but *do not* enable *collectivity*" (in Papacharissi, emphasis hers, 2010, 41).

She argues that online spaces are a hybrid of public and private, and that all civic actions in contemporary democracies emanate from the *locus of a private sphere*. The privately negotiated ideas may later be broadcast in public mediums (blogging, signing a petition, creating and uploading content about public affairs), but a private sphere of activities with a public scope is an apt concept to describe the realities of modern communication spaces where citizens can maintain a sense of control if they are dissatisfied by other sites of civic engagement:

> [...] the subjectivity provided by the intimacy of the private sphere serves as "private preparation" of the autonomous individual for the public sphere. In contemporary democracies, it is from the mobile and connected enclosure of this private cocoon that the individual directs atomized gestures of civic, social, cultural, economic, and multi-contextual natures to the rest of the world. Individuals retreat to the private sphere to escape from the conditions plaguing contemporary democracies into an environment they feel they possess greater control over (21).

Echoes of Fraser's description of counterpublics can be found here, however the focus shifts away from class and democracy, towards the autonomy of the individual to choose their course of civic engagement in contemporary media environments. In this way, Papacharissi argues that the retreat to the cocoon of a private sphere and the negotiation

of this space is an act of dissent, and as such, is inherently political. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider the democratizing implications of this shift to the private sphere of mobile instant messaging, Papacharissi's argument that civic identities may benefit from the privacy afforded by new mediated spaces is highly relevant to the study of such major shifts towards private, yet interactive, communication platforms, as is happening in China. Papacharissi's argument that retreat to a private sphere is both a social and political act is given new meaning in the case of *Weixin,* a highly social communication space that may not undermine collectivity in the same way that prior innovations in mass communication have. Given the growing popularity of private mobile instant messaging over prior publicly accessible Internet platforms, it is tempting to interpret this as a form of retreat to a more intimate, private sphere of (social) life. The most recent official reports by CNNIC have drawn conclusions about such a retreat as well (CNNIC 2013; CNNIC 2014). However, the findings from the questionnaire administered in this study reveal somewhat varied perspectives on their sense of freedom in this "private cocoon" within China's controlled media environment.

Findings on Privacy on *Weixin*

In comparison to the public nature of SNS and microblogs, respondents expressed agreement that *Weixin* offered a private communication space populated by their known contacts in which they could exercise greater control over who they interact with (Appendix A, Question 4):

> "*Weixin* is more private because I can only share my information with my friends. Strangers cannot see my information unless I accept their request." *(Respondent 14)*

> "It's more private. I can say whatever I want to certain people and I don't have to worry about other people seeing those things." *(Respondent 2)*

> "For me, *Weixin* is more private because my personal conversation cannot be seen by other people. And only me friends can see the moments. So I can type anything I want." (*Respondent 16)*

Furthermore, some students referenced the absence of an activity or chat record (that other users can view) as the reason for their sense of privacy. The most popular SNS in China for this age group is Renren.com, which enforces less flexible real identity policy and privacy settings than blogs and instant messangers. Users must register with real identities, educational institutions, and activity records are open. Thus, for most respondents, the ability to browse pages privately and control one's audience in chats contributes to their sense of privacy on *Weixin.*

An interview with Respondent 7 allowed me to explore the deeper roots of her sense of privacy on *Weixin* and other forms of mediated communication. Interestingly, she associated her lack of concern over her privacy on *Weixin* to her upbringing in interconnected housing complexes called *hutong.* Built into narrow lanes and alleys with shared courtyards, privacy is difficult to come by for residents. Respondent 7 explained that she shared common spaces and facilities, and that the interconnected homes influenced her conception of what parts of her life need to be kept out of view. She explained that she loved this form of housing for its routine visits from neighbours, mutual help, and constant interaction with others. Requests for help were never refused, and even television watching – a typically isolated activity – was always done with neighbours. As she has now moved into a modern apartment building, Respondent 7 explained that her new surroundings are much more alienating, and that she longed for the common space of the *hutong,* and the constant interaction it provided.

While *Weixin* seems to allow Respondent 7 to indulge the openness developed in her upbringing by giving her network greater access to the details of her life and daily activities, it also allows her to exercise more independence in her decision-making. She described herself as someone who is very open ("I always say yes to people"), however mediated communication gives her the freedom to make decisions independently. When asked if there were certain types of conversations she preferred to have on *Weixin*, she explained that she preferred to be invited to things via *Weixin* (rather than a phone call or in person) because it allowed her to refuse:

"If you ask me face to face, I can't refuse. I always say yes. […] If someone
comes to me, face to face, I don't want to say no to this person, because she

has come to me to ask me, not in *Weixin*. So… I think she will feel sad."
(Respondent 7)

Thus, Respondent 7 presents rather complex uses of *Weixin* to control and indulge in greater interaction with her network. For those who prioritize social interaction - especially that which is rooted in a background of communal living – over privacy, *Weixin* can be used to actively maintain their relationships, increase their knowledge of the daily lives and backgrounds of others, and increase their level of direct contact. However, their comfort level through various modes of communication has changed. As Respondent 7 explained, messaging first through *Weixin* is her most comfortable form of first contact, which she will follow up with a phone call before meeting face to face. Thus we see the development of new forms of sociability, though rooted in prior expectations for social interaction and (limited) privacy.

(Self) Censorship and State Surveillance

Findings from both the questionnaire and subsequent interviews on the surveillance practices experienced on *Weixin* raise doubts about its potential as a private, counterhegemonic public sphere. Despite Question 4 of the questionnaire being framed with a distinction between public and private as one of approved contacts in one's *Weixin* addressbook, one student related the issue of privacy to state surveillance, and did not perceive there to be a difference in privacy between SNS and microblogs in that regard:

> "No difference, government can see everything they want to see."
> *(Respondent 11)*

And although most respondents did not raise the issue of surveillance in relation to privacy, a small number of respondents mentioned state surveillance and censorship as an impediment to their freedom to express themselves in private chats. In regards to Question 12 (Do you believe you have freedom to express yourself freely about any topic when you chat with people using *Weixin*?" responses included:

> "Well, there is no extreme safe place for people to express opinions. Government will always monitor every conversation." (*Respondent 1*)

"Yes. Maybe when the topics involve government stuff, it's hard to tell then." *(Respondent 2)*

Respondents were evenly split on how freely they could express themselves on the SNS function freely (Appendix A, Question 13). Half of the respondents agreed that they felt they could express themselves freely, most citing the fact that the audience was primarily made up of friends as the reason[22]:

"Yes because people who are my *Wechat* friends are people that I trust, I can tell them what I experienced." *(Respondent 12)*

And as mentioned in the previous chapter, the ability to delete contacts was cited as supporting free self-expression. However, of those who disagreed with the statement that they could express themselves freely through *Weixin's* SNS function, half the respondents did not feel comfortable sharing things with everyone within their *Weixin* network, while the other half mentioned government surveillance:

"No. If I say something that is bad for our government, someone will force us to delete. Like in Weibo, if I say something bad for my government, someone will send a message to us and say that we have to delete." *(Respondent 3)*

"Sometimes. I don't say things about our government though. One of my former classmates cannot send things about the government to the Moments [section]." *(Respondent 2)*

"If we want to talk about politics, *Wechat* is not very safe." *(Respondent 3, Interview)*

So while the closed nature of *Weixin's* SNS platform (only one's own network can see posts) is conducive to self-expression for half of the respondents, a small number of respondents are wary of government surveillance, have heard of instances of censorship on *Weixin*, and appear to perceive surveillance of activity on this platform as similar to public and searchable online platforms such as microblogs, and chat forums.

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[22] The SNS function "Moments," (*pengyou quan)* means "circle of friends"

Not unlike Respondent 1, who believed the government actively monitored all communications, an interview with Respondent 7 revealed a similar attitude about communication through *Weixin* that was informed by a family member:

> "There is always someone listening to you talk every day. My aunt is in the police, she says someone is listening to our conversations, if we talk about some serious problems, someone will always listen [on] your phone. They will catch you. […] if you say something, like, some word that's not allowed, someone will catch you. Because one time, I asked my aunt something, and she said do not talk about this problem on the phone. We talk face to face." *(Respondent 7)*

Despite a greater sense of privacy on *Weixin* from a broader public on the Internet, and control over the (broad)casting of one's messages within their real world contacts, a small number of respondents expressed reticence in expressing criticism about the Chinese government, and have developed an understanding of state surveillance over *Weixin* that that does not differ from that which has come to characterize the Internet and mobile phones.

This questionnaire did not explore respondents' more complex understanding of which activities are vulnerable to surveillance on the different modes of communication one can engage in on *Weixin* (voice calls/messages, video calls/messages, text messages, photos, and links). However, users reported engaging in self-censorship in both private chats and their social network activities on Moments. Issues of surveillance and censorship were not explicitly mentioned in any of the 30 items in the online questionnaire, as I hoped this would allow users to focus on the entities that they personally feel inhibit their self-expression and sense of privacy (their own social network, broader public, government, corporations, hackers, criminals, etc). In doing so, a majority of respondents focused on a distinction between their own networks and a broader public as the reason for their sense of freedom to express themselves on *Weixin*. However, suspicions of government surveillance and incidences of censorship of *Weixin* chats and social networking activities was raised by some of the respondents, suggesting that *Weixin's* categorization as a private mobile instant messaging platform has limitations as an autonomous subaltern public for those wary of state surveillance. These findings are somewhat surprising considering broader studies of youth Internet culture.

Fengshu Liu's (2011) study of young Internet users in China found that few would mention censorship at all in speaking about their experiences using the Internet. In fact, Liu discovered that when she raised to topic of censorship with her respondents, many of them asked what censorship was. Thus, the group sampled in this study may be more aware of, if not more sensitive to, state control over their communication than the average young Internet user in China.

The entity surveilling users is not always perceived to be the Chinese government. An interview with Respondent 16 revealed greater animosity towards the company that owns *Weixin,* Tencent Holdings[23]:

> "There's a company that is really not very good from Chinese people's perspective, Tencent. *Weixin* is made by this company, […] And when you have this [protection] app on your computer, it can show you everything you do. So it can go into your computer and go to your games and your movies, and it shows it all. It's not just QQ, it's a single program, called Tengxun Manager. Whatever we do, someone is watching us. It's not really a thing to worry about anymore. Because they're watching us, what can we do? We just do what we do. I deleted it. But then I downloaded something else, and it'll actually do the same thing! Actually I don't' have a lot of privacy on my computer! *(Respondent 16)*

Despite the wariness over corporate involvement in surveillance, both Respondent 16 and Respondent 1 demonstrated a similar resignation to this state of affairs:

> "*Tengxun* [Tencent] knows what we are talking about. I'm really used to it. It's fine. We are really used to it." *(Respondent 1)*

> *"*For a lot of people who don't think about it very much, they just think, 'oh it's convenient.' They [Tencent] don't have time to listen to it or transcribe it. But if they think harder, or think more deeply about it, then you think there's someone watching, or listening to what you're saying. That feeling is not very good. But this is China."

Contrastingly, Respondent 8 focused on the company's efforts to prevent fraud and other such crimes. When sending URL links, users receive what appears to be an automated message within the chat from the app warning them not to clink on links from unknown

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[23] Tencent Holdings is known as *Tengxun* in Chinese

persons. Respondents 1 and 8 demonstrated quite different responses to this surveillance, though it was not clear which entity they felt surveilled by:

> "It's really horrible, some people are watching you typing things to other people." *(Respondent 1)*

> "[It's] sweet. Although I know that's my friend, I will pay her, we are doing an exchange, the app doesn't know. It just knows I have the possibility to lose my money, so it's sweet to tell me that." *(Respondent 8)*

Taken together, this group demonstrates considerable variation in the level of surveillance they find acceptable and the different actors and entities that concern them. However the responses of resignation and self-censorship are widely shared.

It was not the purpose of this study to investigate the use of *Weixin* to evade government censors, or to actively engage in acts of collective dissent. However, the impacts of *Weixin* explored in this chapter as they relate to users' social ties and self-expression would benefit from being contextualized in studies that have shed light on the complexity of surveillance and censorship strategies in China today. The greatest threat that *Weixin* likely poses for the stability of the Party-state is its utility in organizing collective acts. The most recently conducted quantitative study of censorship practices on the Internet by King et al. (2013) indicate that it is content that refers to or suggests collective action potential that is most commonly censored, rather than criticism of the Chinese government. This fascinating, large-scale study of current censorship practices found that regardless of whether or not comments are supportive of or critical of the state or state actors, references to event keywords that meet three criteria were more likely to be censored: (1) involve protest or organized crowd formation outside the Internet; (b) relate to individuals who have organized or incited collective action on the ground in the past; or (c) relate to nationalism or nationalist sentiment that have incited protest or collective action in the past (King et al. 2013, 331).

Thus, while users indicated a wariness of expressing criticism of the government on *Weixin*, it is perhaps their potential use of *Weixin* to mobilize or even discuss collective action that is more susceptible to censorship. Respondent 2 offers an

interesting example. While she expressed hesitation throughout the questionnaire in criticizing the Chinese government on *Weixin* (See comment on previous page), she also reported engaging in a chat group with fellow members of a religious organization, and described an experience using *Weixin* to organize a charity bazaar with contacts within her network of weak ties, saying that *Weixin* "is the best tool for us to exchange our ideas." Although she did not find *Weixin* helped her expand her strong ties or build trust, she reported that *Weixin* helped her expand her network of weak ties and acquaintances. Thus, while she may not use *Weixin* as a platform to criticize the government, and does not show a propensity or interest in using *Weixin* to expand her network with unknown "Internet friends" to engage in online discourses that challenge the Party or state, it is this use of *Weixin* to facilitate communication with a non-state organization, and to facilitate organization of collective acts outside the mediated space of conversation that is much closer to the Chinese government's concerns.

On May 27, 2014, the State Internet Information Office (SIIO) released a statement announcing a new campaign to crack down on public accounts on *Weixin* that are involved in spreading rumours and information that leads to violence, terrorism, pornography, and fraud,[24] the same reasoning used in all Internet-related crackdowns. The statement acknowledges the potential dangers of public accounts to "spread information on a large scale and mobilize followers." Within two weeks of launching this campaign, Tencent Holdings Ltd. announced that the company had shut down 20 million active accounts (roughly 5%) for links to prostitution activities.[25] This comes just one year after the introduction of public accounts into *Weixin's* constantly evolving platform, a function that was celebrated by journalists and activists for its power to enable them to reach a broad audience in a private communication space. Song Zhibiao, a journalist for the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, a rather outspoken private media outlet, writes and compiles his own newsfeed, *Old News Commentary* on *Weixin* and claims the smaller network of followers is distinctly different from that which he has via conventional

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[24] China Daily (from Xinhua News). May 27, 2014. "China to clean up instant messaging services." http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-05/27/content_17545259.htm

[25] TIME Magazine. June 10, 2014. "20 million China WeChat Accounts Closed for Links to Prostitution." http://time.com/2851900/china-wechat-prostitution/

media channels, and even his own blog Paper Tigers: "You might have 60,000 readers if you publish through a newspaper, but you're not able to have effective interaction [...] ...On WeChat, you might only have 10,000 followers but you have a much stronger connection. [*Weixin*] ...is smaller, but it has more value." (Olesen 2014). However, more recently, prominent and active dissidents have been less optimistic, as the well-known dissident Hu Jia described *Weixin* as a "monitoring weapon in your pocket." (Chin and Mozur 2014)

Changes in the way *Weixin* is used and the attitudes of its users concerning privacy and freedom of expression are best understood by comparing it with what Yang (2009) describes as the "co-evolution of online activism and Internet control" in China. While the architecture and practices of state control of the Internet as a public space shape online activism, online activists themselves respond creatively to state control, expressing contention artfully by "operating near the boundary of authorized channels" (Chapter 2; 2). The result, Yang emphasizes, is that both state power and online activism have both become more sophisticated in their process of mutual exchange. Thus, when new platforms of communication such as *Weixin* emerge and expand, remediating previous tools of communication, their unique applications by individuals contributes to a co-evolution of this relationship between state power and popular contention in mediated communication spaces. This co-evolution may be seeing a slight turn towards control, as some respondents in this study noted. However, it is not unfamiliar terrain and users exercise control in how they choose to navigate it.

Reflections on Methodological Limitations

Looking broadly at the findings of this questionnaire, respondents certainly shared interesting thoughts towards their modes of communication with different groups within their social network and the particular impacts of *Weixin*. Though their contributions to open-ended questions in the online questionnaire were brief, and certainly would have benefitted from follow-up questioning, the insights were still highly valuable and enlightening to the research topic. As a preliminary and exploratory endeavour into a very recent but widespread shift in communication technology in China, I believe this research design was able to achieve an understanding of the impact of *Weixin* use on the

social networks of this group of Chinese teens based on their candid self-reflections and contributions.

As with any self-administered online survey, not least of the limitations is a respondent's willingness to devote time and attention to a lengthy, and for some, arduous task of carefully reading and writing responses to a multitude of questions. Another minor problem in this research design is that respondents were not able to get clarification on the meaning of questions. However, considerable thought went into how to operationalize various concepts in order to limit misunderstanding or misinterpretation of questions. For instance, the categorization of different types of ties (strong ties and weak ties) was described in detail with clear language that was followed by situational examples. For instance, strong ties were described as "very close people, which might include those you trust, those you discuss important matters with, regularly keep in touch with, or are there for you when you need help." By describing various aspects of the concept of a strong tie, though not limiting it strictly to those parameters, the respondents in this questionnaire were able to exercise control in how they categorized those in their network, and were less likely to need clarification on this issue. However, other concepts benefitted from a lack of explication. For instance, a question was asked about whether or not respondents felt that *Weixin* helped them build trust in their relationships. "Social trust" as a concept in communications, or psychology, and even within studies of contentious politics or political culture utilize highly specific definitions of trust relating to support, harm, privacy, and surveillance. However, I hoped that by leaving the term "trust" open in the questionnaire, respondents were able to interpret the aspects of trust most important to them in their relations with others. Some respondents made reference to the issue of trust at subsequent points in the questionnaire, enabling me to get a better sense of how and when trust mattered in their *Weixin* activities. Despite the structured method chosen in this study, I employed an interpretive approach in giving the respondents room to define terms with their own values, motives and purposes (Henn et al. 2013, 15)

Interviews conducted with a small subset of the respondents allowed me to clarify and get further information on some of the distinct comments of some respondents, and

allowed me to get confirmation of some of the more commonly expressed attitudes and views shared by the interviewees and the other respondents. However, not surprisingly, I believe a lack of contact between the researcher and those respondents who were not interviewed had an impact on the depth of findings in this online survey. Without the ability to directly introduce the purpose of the study and my background as the researcher, I was left to rely on the respondents' own initiative in fully reading and understanding the purpose of the study through the invitation letters and consent forms initially distributed to potential respondents before the study, as well as the implied consent letter distributed via e-mail. While my contact at the respondents' school was able to give some further information to students about the study, I believe more substantial interaction should have been employed. Given the highly tech-savvy nature of this group, perhaps a video introduction of myself and the research topic would have been more effective than the e-mailed format chosen. A more personalized element to the process would have allowed me to establish a minimum level of rapport with the respondents, and could have engaged them in deeper reflections on the issues raised in the questionnaire. At the very least, it may have contributed to the respondents' level of eagerness or interest in participating.

Nonetheless, I believe the research design employed in this study was able to achieve its objective of empirically exploring a single case study and its generalizability to theoretical propositions concerning ICT's impacts on social networks as mobilizing structures for contentious collective action. And as this case study offered a newly developing phenomenon that has received little scholarly attention, this project contributes a revealing analysis of the communication practices of *Weixin-mediated* social networks, and how any effects might contribute to theoretical understandings of popular resistance in China.

Implications and Tentative Conclusions: Contentious Politics or Contentious Authoritarianism?

The process of formulating, researching, and writing this study with *Weixin* as the particular communication tool I was to focus on began in the early months of 2014. At the time, my own use of *Weixin* was beginning to wind down as I migrated over to competing chat applications with my friends and family. While formulating the questionnaire I was to administer to my participant group, I began to wonder if young people in China, as the intrepid media enthusiasts they are, had also moved on to the next hot mobile app. However, after collecting and analyzing the findings of my study, it became clear that the tool itself may very well lose favour with its 355 million users, but the ways in which its users employ it to alter their engagement with their social networks is less transient than fads in communication tools. The respondents in this study now find themselves using mobile connectivity to expand not only their networks of strong and weak ties, but a broader network of acquaintances as well, practices that rely less on a communication tool and more so on new forms of sociability.

Within this small group of sixteen students, incredible variation was exhibited in their particular uses of *Weixin* to bond with their core ties of friends and family and build or maintain trust in these relationships, actively sharing various media through the application, and engaging in reciprocal acts of help within their network. While a select few showed a keen interest in using *Weixin* to connect with a more heterogeneous network outside their direct ties, most respondents expressed a tendency to focus on their offline contacts, a network that nonetheless was described by most as having expanded with the use of *Weixin*. Although *Weixin* is not perceived by all the respondents to be a platform free from (state) surveillance, the chat and SNS functions enabled a greater sense of privacy from a world wide web of strangers compared to prior Internet platforms such as microblogging and SNS. Both its instant messaging and social networking functions were described by some of the respondents as unsafe for comments about the government. However, for those who did not reference government censorship or surveillance, the judgement of their social networks seemed to be their concern, and

Weixin provided some of those students with a more comfortable medium of expression than direct contact, and allowed control over the makeup of their networks, and the audience in their mediated communications.

It is easy to overstate the implications of digitally mediated contention in China's authoritarian regime. From a historical perspective, present day liberal democracies such as England were transformed from enslaving autocracies by collective mobilization facilitated by communication technologies such as the printing press (Tarrow 2008, in O'Brien, 10). Nonetheless, Tarrow (2008) reminds us that popular mobilization can intersect with institutional change, resulting in subtle shifts in the nature of a regime, and that "incremental changes and the unintended responses to them can often be more effective in bringing about regime change than more open challenges that question the bases of political legitimacy."

Even among illiberal regimes and unconsolidated democracies, the case of China still stands out. China scholars have generated sound explanations for the constant state of contention in this illiberal regime. The literature on "social movement societies," that is, societies that are characterized by a routinization of social movements (Meyer and Tarrow 1998) is argued by Xi Chen (2012) to be inapplicable to the case of China. Chen argues that China lacks the necessary conditions for the development of such a society (namely professionalized social movement organizations, legally and institutionally protected means for resolving contention, reduction in violence and disruption), and as such, cannot be characterized as a social movement society. Rather, contention in China amounts to a rarity that Chen refers to as "contentious authoritarianism," a strong authoritarian regime that accommodates or facilitates in some way widespread and routinized popular collective action over a relatively long period of time. In other words, it is contention that has neither led to the destruction of the repressive regime, nor been quashed by it, unlike the fate of illiberal and transitional regimes in Latin America. In the case of China, it is a unique system in that "beneath the surface of noise and anxiety, the whole political system remains stable" (5). Cai (2008) adds to Chen's argument by positing that decentralized state authority in China has allowed autonomous local

governments to use repression at their own discretion, while central authorities maintain a safe distance from any blame.

The uncertainty the highest authorities in such a regime might feel in the face of such considerable unrest is lessened by this division of power, as they need only worry about swooping in to deal with a limited number of cases. Where claims are unlikely to be repressed successfully by local authorities, the central government can step in at the eleventh hour to save the day, and ultimately maintain stability and bolster its own legitimacy amidst growing contention. Furthermore, the weak institutionalization of formal NGOs gives the regime greater resiliency. As NGO's involve themselves increasingly in service provision and policy implementation on the state's behalf, embedding themselves into "harmonious" relationship with the authorities that confer them with legitimacy, they are simultaneously resolving the very issues that could undermine the state's existence (Hildebrandt 2013, 5).

If the Chinese state continues this willingness to tolerate – or even facilitate, as Chen (2012) argues - popular resistance, and if the frequency and intensity of contentious acts continues to grow, the role of mediated communications in this state-society relationship will be even more salient. The digital divide between socioeconomic groups and urban-rural groups is certainly present in China, though it is rapidly lessening as China continues to urbanize, the number of new rural Internet users increases, and the cost of mobile Internet decreases. Thus, the use of the Internet and mobile instant messaging is becoming a more integral element of a more connected and mobile mediated life for a larger and more diverse portion of the population. The case study in this thesis is a preliminary step in understanding the uses of *Weixin* through its most active social group. The contributions of my respondents provides sufficient indication that existing theoretical propositions on the impact of social media is reflected in the context of China and its evolving mobile communications, which are seen in this case study to be used in various ways by individuals to solidify and extend networks that become more resilient through changes in proximity, more intimate through the building of trust, and more autonomous through control over one's network in a private communication space. Thus, future research that can expand our knowledge of how

existing and new interpersonal networks operate in multi-functional instant messaging platforms, and how new forms of sociability are enabled by them will contribute to a more robust understanding of what networks can contribute in times of crisis to mobilizing contentious collective action in China.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

Appendix A

The purpose of this research project is explore Weixin, a popular communication tool in China. The researcher is interested in how young people in China use Weixin today, and how it can support social interactions. This survey also focuses on the issue of privacy on Weixin.

*1. Which types of websites and mobile apps do you use, please rank in order of preference with a number from 1-5 (1 is your favourite, 5 is the least preferred, N/A if you do not use it):

☐	Blog (e.g. Blogspot, Sina Blog)	☐ N/A
☐	Microblog (e.g. Sina Weibo, Twitter)	☐ N/A
☐	Social Network Site (e.g. Ren Ren, Douban, Facebook)	☐ N/A
☐	Instant Messaging (e.g. Weixin, LINE)	☐ N/A
☐	Chat Forums and/or Bulletin Boards (e.g. Qiangguo Luntan, Tianya BBS)	☐ N/A

*2. How often do you use Weixin and/or another Instant Messaging App such as LINE, Kakao Talk, or What's App?

○ Several times an hour

○ Several times a day

○ About once a day

○ 3-5 times a week

○ 1-2 times a week

○ Once every few weeks

○ Once a month

Other (please describe how often you use Weixin in detail)

✱3. Which functions do you use in Weixin (please indicate the importance from 1-8, 1 is the most important function, 8 is the least, select "n/a" if you do not use this function)

o

[ ]	One-to-One Chat	[ ] N/A
[ ]	Group chats	[ ] N/A
[ ]	Shake (摇一摇）	[ ] N/A
[ ]	Drift （漂流瓶）	[ ] N/A
[ ]	Moments （朋友圈）	[ ] N/A
[ ]	Public Accounts (订阅号）	[ ] N/A
[ ]	Broadcast Messages （群发助手）	[ ] N/A
[ ]	Games	[ ] N/A

✱4. Activity on Weixin is not public, and is closed to your Weixin contacts. For instance, only your contacts can see your private one-to-one chats, chat groups, and social media posts such as photos, videos, news articles.

Compared to other forms of social networking (for example on Ren Ren, Weibo, Facebook, etc), do you think Weixin is more private or less private? Why?

[ ]

✱5. How many active Weixin chats (both one-to-one and group chats) are you currently participating in?

(an "active chat" means a chat in which the last message sent or received was less than 1 month ago)

Total Number of Active
Group/One-to-One Chats [ ]

✱6. Do you follow any public accounts (订阅号） on Weixin? If yes, please provides examples by giving the name or type/theme of the accounts (for example, mass media account, government account, company, journalist, entertainer, famous blogger)

( ) Yes

( ) No

Yes, for example:

[ ]

✱7. Which types of chat groups (3 or more participants) have you participated in during the past 6 months?

☐ a chat group with current classmates

☐ a chat group with former classmates

☐ a chat group with members of an organization or club

☐ a chat group with family members

☐ a chat group with members of a religious organization

☐ a chat group with friends from your hometown

☐ a chat group with people you share a common hobby or interest with

Other (please describe any other chat groups in the space below)

[   ]

✱8. Think about your Weixin activity (in chats and/or Moments), and please check all the statements that you AGREE with below:

☐ I like to share articles about interesting news on Weixin

☐ I like to share my opinion on important issues on Weixin

☐ I like to have open discussions with my friends about topics we are interested in on Weixin

☐ I like to share media that I created on Weixin (e.g. videos, photos, stories, etc.)

☐ I like to share media created by others on Weixin (e.g. videos, photos, stories, etc.)

☐ I don't agree with any of the statements above

✱9. Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statement:

"Weixin helps me stay close with people in my life."

○ Strongly agree

○ Agree

○ Disagree

○ Strongly disagree

○ Neither agree/disagree (If none of the above answers is true for you, please share your opinion here. For instance, if it you agree in some cases but not in others, please describe your opinion in greater detail in the space below)

[   ]

✱10. Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statement:

"Weixin helps me interact with people who I believe are very different from myself."

◯ Strongly agree

◯ Agree

◯ Disagree

◯ Strongly disagree

◯ Neither agree/disagree (If none of the above answers is true for you, please share your opinion here. For instance, if you agree in some cases but not in others, please describe your opinion in greater detail in the space below)

_____

✱11. Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statement:

"Weixin helps me build trust in my relationships."

◯ Strongly agree

◯ Agree

◯ Disagree

◯ Strongly disagree

◯ Neither agree/disagree (If none of the above answers is true for you, please share your opinion here. For instance, if you agree in some cases but not in others, please describe your opinion in greater detail in the space below)

_____

✱12. Do you believe you have freedom to express yourself freely about any topic when you chat with people use Weixin? Why or why not?

_____

✱13. Do you believe you have freedom to express yourself freely about any topic in the Moments section (朋友圈) of Weixin? Why or why not?

_____

✱14. In what ways do you use Weixin to help you build or maintain friendships and other types of relationships? (Suggested response length of 2-3 sentences)

_____

*15. Have you made new connections with people using Weixin (for example, become online friends, become real world friends, send e-mails or chat together)?

○ Yes

○ No

*16. Do you find that Weixin helps you interact with people who you share common interests with? Why or why not?

*17. Do you find that Weixin helps you interact with people whose social background is different from yours? Why or why not?

*18. Do you discuss political issues with people on Weixin? Why or why not?

*19. Has Weixin changed your contact with people who generally share your opinions?

○ Greatly increased

○ Increased

○ Decreased

○ Greatly decreased

○ No change

○ Other (please specify)

*20. Has Weixin changed your contact with people who share your political interests?

◯ Greatly increased

◯ Increased

◯ Decreased

◯ Greatly decreased

◯ No change

◯ Other (please specify)

This is the final section of the questionnaire

This research explores people's relationships and how they communicate with one another. This next section will be about two different types of people in your life:

1) those you feel VERY CLOSE, such as close family and friends
2) those you feel SOMEWHAT CLOSE to who are more than just acquaintances

We'd like to know how many people in your life fit into each one of these categories.

**You may find it helpful to get a piece of paper and a pen and make a list

*21. Let's start with the people you feel VERY close to, which might include those you trust, those you discuss important matters with, regularly keep in touch with, or are there for you when you need help.

Thinking about ALL the people who fit this description, for each category below, how many people are there? (Please enter a number for each category below)

Members of your immediate family and relatives (parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents)	
Family friends	
Non-family friends	
People you know from school	
People you know from an extracurricular activity, volunteer work, or hobby	
People you met through the internet	
People you met through Weixin	
Neighbours	

＊22. Generally speaking, how do you interact with these VERY CLOSE people?

(please select all the options that are applicable)

☐ phone call

☐ video chat

☐ face-to-face

☐ SMS

☐ instant messages (e.g. Weixin)

☐ social network sites

☐ e-mails

☐ microblog

☐ mail

Other (please specify)

[   ]

＊23. Do you use Weixin with any of these VERY CLOSE people mentioned above to organize group activities or events together? If yes, please describe some examples.

[   ]

＊24. Please check all the statements that you agree with:

My VERY CLOSE contacts and I…

☐ help each other with basic needs (for example, sharing class notes, fixing someone's computer)

☐ help each other in emergencies and/or when we are in trouble (for example, helping someone with a health problem, or helping a classmate who is in trouble at school)

☐ share important information with each other (for example, telling each other about news, important events to attend, or information about education or jobs)

☐ give each other advice (for example, advising each other about the future, studying methods, how to solve a problem)

☐ help each other financially

☐ None of the above

*25. Now let's talk about the second type of people in your life -- the people you feel SOMEWHAT CLOSE with. They're more than just casual acquaintances, but they're not as close as the friends and relatives you were thinking of in the previous section.

Thinking about ALL the people who fit this description, for each category below, how many people are there? (Please enter a number for each category below)

Members of your immediate family and relatives (parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents)

Family friends

Non-family Friends

People you know from school

People you know from an extracurricular activity, volunteer work, or hobby

People you met through the Internet

People you met through Weixin

Neighbours

*26. How do you interact with these SOMEWHAT CLOSE people?

(please select all the options that are applicable)

☐ phone call

☐ video chat

☐ face-to-face

☐ SMS

☐ instant messages (e.g. Weixin)

☐ social network sites

☐ e-mails

☐ microblog

☐ mail

Other (please specify)

✱27. Do you use Weixin with any of these SOMEWHAT CLOSE people mentioned above to organize group activities or events together? If yes, please describe some examples.

[text box]

✱28. Please check all the statements that you agree with:

My SOMEWHAT CLOSE contacts and I...

[ ] help each other with basic needs (for example, sharing class notes, fixing someone's computer)

[ ] help each other in emergencies and/or when we are in trouble (for example, helping someone with a health problem, or helping a classmate who is in trouble at school)

[ ] share important information with each other (for example, telling each other about news, important events to attend, or information about education or jobs)

[ ] give each other advice (for example, advising each other about the future, studying methods, how to solve a problem)

[ ] help each other financially

[ ] None of the above

✱29. Overall, do you think using Weixin has INCREASED, DECREASED, or NOT REALLY AFFECTED...

	INCREASED	DECREASED	NOT REALLY AFFECTED
the number of people you are VERY CLOSE with	◯	◯	◯
the number of people you are SOMEWHAT CLOSE to	◯	◯	◯
the number of ACQUAINTANCES you have (acquaintances are not as close as the other two types of people)	◯	◯	◯

30. Do you have any other comments, questions, or concerns?

[text box]

Thank you very much for your participation in this questionnaire. Please feel free to contact the researcher with any of your concerns, or if you would like to learn more about the findings of this study.

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