Emotional criticism as public engagement: How weibo users discuss "Peking University statues wear face-masks"

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ABSTRACT

Weibo has become a popular venue for political discussions in China. It rekindles the hope to build an online public sphere in (semi)authoritarian regimes. Yet, how does China's weibo bear characteristics distinct from public sphere? How does emotionality shape weibo discussions? This inquiry draws on emotion framing theory to analyze weibo discussions about air pollution after students from Peking University face-masked statues of prominent intellectuals on their campus to express discontent. Analyses show solo play-of-words, hasty blaming and regional confrontations dominate the discussions. Indignation and sorrowful resignation shape both the form and the content of online discussion. Distinct from the ideal of a public sphere, China's weibosphere serves mainly as a venue for netizens to ferment and vent emotions and to lodge hasty blame/criticism against authorities or against non-locals. Implications for local theory building and online democracy in China are discussed.

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The dwindling number of venues for citizens to engage in free and open discussion of public issues undermines the foundation of democracy and diminishes the prospect for (semi)authoritarian regimes to democratize (Putnam, 2000). The emergence of social media promises to revive democratic politics by offering an online "public sphere" for rational deliberation (Habermas, 1997, 1989; Strandberg, 2008).

However, empirical studies of online forums revealed a more complex landscape. Scholars found a large variety of discursive practices that differ qualitatively from rational deliberation (Gimmler, 2001; Janssen and Kies, 2005; Papacharissi, 2004). Among them, Dahlberg (2011) identified communitarianism, rational deliberation and liberal individualism as three equally valid and equally prevalent models of democratic communication in cyberspace. Similar findings expand the inquiries of online public engagement beyond a narrow focus on deliberative features (Freelon, 2010). After scholars established the diversity of online discourses, closer examination into the dynamics of online discussions, especially into the impacts of emotionality, is needed.

Yet, few scholars have explicated the relations between emotionality and different models of online political communication. Though often perceived opposite to rational deliberation, emotionality is also inherent to political expressions (Pantti and van Zoonen, 2006). Emotion frame theory (EFT) suggests that emotionality can shape attitude towards political issues, causal attribution for social problems and other important political behaviors in distinctive ways (Nabi, 2002, 2003). Furthermore, extant literature suggests that wide sharing of indignation against perceived injustices may obtain moral/

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political legitimacy and present an alternative route for sympathetic citizens to impel political changes in Chinese culture (Lin, 2011).

Even fewer researchers have scrutinized the variations of these relations in a (semi)authoritarian regime with Chinese cultural traditions. Unlike in most western democracies, the Internet is one of the very few venues for citizens to publish criticism against or to express discontent with political elites (or public policies) in (semi)authoritarian regimes. To satisfy needs for candid political expression, Chinese netizens may grow a unique form of dependency on Internet political forums. Meanwhile, China's cyberspace is not censorship-free. Harsh criticism of the government often invites blocking or deletion by human cyber-censors or by keyword-based software censors. To develop more effective and safer strategies for political expression in a censored and somewhat free cyberspace, Chinese netizens may resort to symbolic resources in their cultural stock. Established cultural forms (such as poem, motto or coinage) can be strategically deployed to circumvent censorship and to generate shared emotion among online discussants.

In response, this study draws on EFT (Nabi, 2003) to qualitatively analyze how emotionality frames Weibo discussions about air pollution after students of Peking University face-masked statues of notable intellectuals on campus. We add to literature by: (a) expanding EFT's applicability from predicting the effect of emotional media content on individuals to analyzing the dynamic interrelations between emotionality and various weibo discourses; (b) explicating the impacts of Chinese culture and (semi)authoritarian system to localize the theorization about online public discussions; (c) critiquing public sphere as a normative western concept vis-à-vis empirical findings from China in the Web 2.0 era; and (d) stressing the importance of emotional criticism as a valid form of public engagement, and an alternative route to political changes.

Specifically, we first analyze the texts of discussions on weibo accounts of the *People's Daily* and of *Sina News*. Then, we use *Nvivo* qualitative data analysis package to cross-code emotionality with other forms of discussion contents (including causal/remedy attribution, regional confrontations, satirical allusion, and media criticism) to explicate their interrelations in weibosphere. Finally, the implications and explanations for findings are conceptually discussed to accentuate their distinctiveness, which further supports theory localization. Throughout the inquiry, we embrace an open-ended inductive approach to allow for deviations from established western theories and for possible opportunities of re-conceptualization in the context of China.

1. Literature review

1.1. Online discussions and discourse architecture

Social media render it easier for citizens to discuss public issues openly and rationally. In cyberspace, public contributions are often assessed on the quality of argument rather than on social status (Papacharissi, 2002), and discussion can be open to all (that is, if all can afford Internet access). These features facilitate rational-critical argumentation. Yet, studies show that online discussions are rarely rational-critical. Strong emotionality and hasty opinions abound. Even less likely is online discussion a "dialogical process of exchanging reasons to focus on common concerns that cannot be settled without coordination and cooperation" (Bohman, 1996). It is not surprising to find "several culturally fragmented cyberspheres that occupy a common virtual space" (Papacharissi, 2002; Downey and Fenton, 2003). Scholars suggest that it is the uncontrollability, nonlinearity, and emotionality that make online political communication more valuable and more attractive to participants (Sobkovicz and Sobkovicz, 2012).

Along the same line, Dahlgren (2005) classified online discussion spaces into five categories, including e-government, advocacy/activist, civic, para-political and journalistic in order to illustrate that "the Internet facilitates an impressive communicative heterogeneity". But some of his categorization is based on sponsor of the spheres and some on the nature of discussion. Shifting bases for categorization render theorization and operationalization difficult. To understand Internet-based grassroot actions, Pickard (2008) proposed three types of online spheres: partisan public spheres where ideologues discuss politics in an atmosphere of agreement; pluralist democratic spheres where proclivities are converted into actions; and radical participatory spheres whose decentralized resistance characterizes decision-making and the issues they espouse. However, the normative conception of rational deliberation is missing in this typology.

Seeing these limits, we choose to start this inquiry with the triad of communitarianism, deliberation and liberal individualism, three of the most prevalent standards of online political communication (Freelon, 2010). Each of these terms carries complex histories of political philosophy behind them. Yet, in this article we use them as labels for particular sets of recognizable behavior in online communication situations, and what can be claimed of the findings should therefore consist with our narrower use of these concepts. This framework situates deliberation along with other concepts often used to assess communication characteristics. It serves as our conceptual springboard, which is consciously re-conceptualized along the analyses of China's weibo discussions. Respectively, communitarianism celebrates disengagement with outsiders and frequent conversations with insiders who share the same worldview. People in this camp are keen to advance in-group prerogatives, cultivate group cohesion/identity and refrain from engaging with outsiders (Jensen, 2003). Members of communitarian forums are most likely to mobilize for collective political actions. Liberal individualism prioritizes single-minded and uninhibited self-expression of opinion or emotion, often at the expenses of civility and responsiveness to others. People in this camp disclose personal information generously or actively advertise contents they create outside the forum (i.e., political blogs or video journalism). They tend to disregard others, and reciprocal communication is often absent. Stromer-Galley (2007) depicted these "personal narratives" as outside the conception of rational deliberative exchange.

In contrast, rational deliberation features respect for political differences; exercise of reason to support opinions; question-asking in good faith; and a relatively civil tone (Dryzek, 2000; Habermas, 1989). Deliberative discussants use logical methodical appeals to the common good to argue for one's position; focus on public issues; maintain equality between participants; keep topic focus throughout discussion, and promote conversations across ideological camps.

Which of the above discourses thrives largely depends on an online forum's discourse architecture. Discourse architecture is the technological characteristics that either promote or discourage user engagement (Jones and Rafaeli, 2000; Sack, 2005). It includes content options for users, text length allowed for a single post, or the presence of "reply" or "forward" functions in conversations (Davies and Gangadharan, 2009; Wright and Street, 2007). Coleman and Gøtze (2001) found that when messages are systematically archived and users can take time for contemplation before responding to others, the proportion of deliberation may increase while affective bonding and mutual understanding may diminish in online forums (Fishkin et al., 2005). Wright and Street (2007) found that prior review moderation and threaded messages increase deliberation in online forums. Suler (2004) discovered that user anonymity and status invisibility incline people towards liberal individualism in online discussions. By inference, in an Internet forum with all these technological characteristics, various models of political communication may co-exist in online discussions.

1.2. Emotion framing effect

When deliberative, individualistic and communitarian modes of political communication co-exist in an online forum, they can impact each other. EFT unravels the relations between emotional media contents and audience cognition/behavior (Collins and Loftus, 1975). Its underlying theoretical mechanism may also illuminate the interaction between emotionality and other discourses in political discussions. Consistent with framing effect theory in general, EFT assumes that emotionality leaves traces or activation tags on memory. When individuals process information to make decisions or judgments, the most salient memory traces or activation tags at the moment are most likely to be activated and form a basis for judgment (spread activation model) (i.e., Hastie and Park, 1986; Iyengar, 1990; Bryant and Zilman,1994).

Based on the spread activation model, Nabi (2003) stipulates that different types and strength of emotion leaves memory traces to shape information processing, causal attribution and attitude formation. Compared with rational arguments, emotionality changes attitudes more effectively and leads to higher risk perception and more accurate memory (Choi and Lin, 2009). Han et al. (2007) found that different emotions affect information processing and decision-making differently. Emotions cause people to appraise events in line with the central appraisal patterns that characterize particular emotions (Bodenhausen et al., 1994; Nabi, 2002). Kim and Cameron (2011) found that in corporate crises, people exposed to anger-inducing stories read the content less carefully and held more negative attitude to the company. While sad people tend to blame situational factors, angry people often see specific targets as responsible and hold more negative attitude to involved parties (Han et al., 2007). Nabi (2003) proposed that when angered, the public tends to attack the accuser or the culprit, but sad people are readier to accept compensation. Jin and Pang (2010) called emotions "one of the key anchors in the public's interpretation of crises".

In the other direction, Nabi (2003) also proposed that framed messages can evoke distinct emotions. Scholars confirmed that emotional responses depend upon how policy-related messages are framed (Gross and D'Ambrosio, 2004). Shen and Dillard (2007) found that whether public service announcements (PSA) are framed advantageously or disadvantageously elicits different emotional responses from the public. After corporate crises, the stronger media attribute causes and assign blames to specific business(es) or to particular individuals, the more the public feels anger, takes pleasure from the pain of the corporate, and reduces possible feeling of sympathy with the corporation (Coombs, 2004).

1.3. Sina weibo and discussions about air pollution

The interrelation between emotionality and weibo discourses bear distinctive Chinese characteristics. With instant viral communication in a social network site with millions of active nodes (Weibo hosts 143,800,000 active users in April, 2014), the spread of weibo information often outpaces China's strictest official censors (O'Brien, 2008). Speedy information dissemination, ad hoc Internet content regulation, and unsettled cultural norms for online political discussions allow China's netizens to express more-or-less freely in cyberspace, despite exact restrictions elsewhere in a (semi)authoritarian system (Chase and Mulvenon, 2002). Many seize the opportunity to utter bitter criticism of government performances or discontent with the consequences of public policies in explicit or oblique forms (King et al., 2013; Tang and Bhattacharya, 2011). They can find few culturally appropriate and politically safer venues for such expressions offline. Consequently, weibosphere is rife with grievances about problems caused by China's rapid socio-economic changes (Yang, 2009). Meanwhile, instead of changing China's media system overnight, weibo adapts to China's (semi)authoritarian media system over time. To keep government trust and carry on business (MacKinnon, 2011), weibo hires many human censors and uses sophisticated software to monitor "sensitive words". Mobilization of collective political actions and explicit criticisms of authorities are invariably censored or penalized. Despite censorship, Chinese bloggers routinely uncover corruption, help solve social problems, and even pressure state officials to change foreign policy (Hassid, 2012). In order to circumvent Internet censorship, express their views safely and also to attract attention from peers, weibo bloggers can draw on China's cultural stock to create clever discursive tactics. Oblique metaphors, original coinages and allusion to famous poems or motto are often adapted for political

expression. For instance, instead of using four-letter-words directly, netizens skillfully deploy the "grass-mud-horse lexicon" (grass-mud-horse has the same pronunciation of a common four-letter-word in Chinese) in discussion to show indignation. Moreover, weibo users also adapt official discourses such as (the Communist party) "shall serve the people whole-heartedly" into (the government) "serves people with smog" to show the irony of the situation.

Furthermore, weibo's discourse architecture combines elements of BBS with those of personal blogs (MacKinnon, 2008). This combination suits the nature of Chinese "who like to chat in groups [...and it explains...] why you may see a lot of bickering and fighting on Weibo" (Jing, 2011). Weibo enables users to write nuanced messages in Chinese characters; respond to specified others via the @ mark; and cite other's words literally in their own posts. Weibo users can also customize their information diet by opting to follow different accounts; attach longer documents or multiple photos to a post of limited length; and browse through systematically-archived records of earlier discussions or threaded comments to each post. These features promote participation in conversations. On the other hand, weibo users can register with real names or they can opt to remain anonymous and invisible in discussions. They may or may not carefully read or contemplate on the archived records before responding to others.

In such a sphere, a heated discussion about China's air pollution was triggered by photos of face-masked statues of notable intellectuals in Peking University. These photos were widely distributed and viewed for over 100,000 times online in a single day. From February 21st to 27th, 2014, one seventh of China was hit by severe smog. It became perilous to walk the streets of Beijing or those of any of the smog-hit Northern provinces without facemasks. On February 22nd, students in China's Peking University put facemasks onto statues of prominent intellectuals on their own campus to show grave concern and discontent with the situation. Jiang Chao, the student who initiated the stunt wanted to "use some black humor to speak out our worries about the gravity of China's air pollution". It seems that her worries were widely shared and this stunt was enthusiastically applauded in cyberspace. Starting from the night of February 26, strong cold wind started to blow dirty air away from the Northern provinces to the South of China, and Beijing's smog was relieved significantly. However, discussion about this event and about air pollution in China did not die down immediately. The event topped weibo's hot-topic list in February 2014.

1.4. Research questions and hypotheses

Extant literature suggests that weibo discussions may contain rational deliberation, communitarian discourses as well as individualistic expression of emotion or of opinion. And these discourses can influence each other. Furthermore, we are also aware that the conceptualization of deliberative, communitarian and liberal individualistic models of political communication is rooted in western democratic practice. These conceptions carry assumptions that may lack a solid basis in China's political practice either today or in its cultural traditions of the past. To explicate, communitarianism assumes that stranger citizens can actively build up communities to advocate and act for their common political interests. For Chinese whose sociality is organized around and then metaphorically expanded from *guanxi* networks in their extended family domain (Zhai, 2013; Fei, 1999), community of strangers based on shared political interest is a modern novelty. As a result, weibo discussions may deviate from communitarian practice in important ways. Besides, uninhibited self-disclosure and political expression with disregard for civility and for responsiveness from others is usually deemed crude and weak in Chinese culture. Not to mention that such single-minded expressions can often court disasters for oneself and for one's families in China's imperial past. Besides, rational deliberation also hosts a series of assumptions, which find no ground in China's past or present. For instance, China has never seen a western-style bourgeois class to engage in rational deliberation of public issues, as was the case in Europe in the 18th century. And, boundaries between the private and the public are not as clear-cut in China as in the West. Chinese often reference norms within their private sphere to organize social interactions in the public domain (Zhai, 2013).

In order not to straitjacket the inquiry with hypotheses made up entirely of imported concepts, and blind ourselves to possibilities for re-conceptualization, we choose to keep the inquiry as open as possible both at this stage and at the methodology part. For this stage, instead of testing whether deliberation and other discourse types identified by western scholars exist in China's weibosphere, we ask the following open-end questions:

RQ1: To what extent does weibo discussion take on rational deliberation attributes??
RQ2: To what extent does weibo discussion take on liberal individualistic attributes?
RQ3: To what extent does weibo discussion take on communitarian attributes??

Besides, as EFT stipulates two-way interrelations between emotionality and message frame and causal/responsibility attribution, we hypothesize that emotion expression and these discourses influence each other in weibosphere. Likewise, we also need to stay open about the exact manner how emotionality interacts with various discourses in discussions about air pollution in a Chinese social network site. Hence, we ask:

RQ4: How do emotionality and different discourses influence each other in Weibo discussion about air pollution?

2. Method

2.1. Data collection

We searched with the key word of "Statues in Peking University wear facemask" (北大雕像带口罩 in Chinese) on Sina weibo and downloaded all discussion texts posted on the public accounts of the "*People's Daily*" (392 posts) and on "*Sina News*" (134 posts) from Feb 23rd to 25th, 2014. After deleting irrelevant contents (advertisement or unrelated chitchats between netizens), a total of 396 posts are left for analyses.

We chose to download and analyze comments posted on the Weibo accounts of "*People's Daily*" and "*Sina News*". One is the weibo account of China's top-rank party-organ newspaper (the *People's Daily*) and the other is of a mainstream commercial news portal (www.sina.com.cn). Discussions about air pollution on both accounts were very active after students masked statues in Peking University. Since discussion contents on both accounts are user-generated, regulated by the same weibo censors, and facilitated by the same discourse architecture in weibosphere, no systematic comparison is made between them. Given that this choice leaves out many other forms of online forums (i.e., BBS, personal blog or chat room), findings and implications thereby derived should be limited to news weibo supported by commercial news services or by party-newspapers in China.

We analyze weibo discussions that immediately followed the "Statues in Peking University wear face-mask" event. This event triggered torrents of online discussions about air pollution by a large diversity of users within a short time. A wealth of fine details about the dynamics of online discussions emerged with high intensity. Besides, the issue of air pollution is relevant to all though not all have expertise on the topic. Given the topic's relevance and its uncertainty to the public, discussants have a reasonably high level of need for orientation, which is a prerequisite for EFT to take effect.

We download texts from the time span between February 23rd and 25th, 2014. The event of "Peking University statues wear face-masks" occurred on February 22, and it started to be discussed wildly on weibo since February 23. According to agenda life cycle literature (i.e., McCombs, 2004), an agenda item lives on traditional mass media for about two to three weeks on average before fading out. But online agenda items are more transient. To capture the richest nuances and liveliest dynamics of online discourses, we choose to analyze the discussion at its hottest before it started to lose steam online.

2.2. Coding and analyses

To answer the research questions and stay open to the uniqueness of online political communication in China, we employ the constant comparison method of grounded theory to construct an open coding scheme inductively (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Procedures of qualitative content analyses are followed.

The author and a graduate research assistant collaborated to code the downloaded texts. First, the author read all the texts for three rounds, using single post as unit of analysis. For the first round, the author read texts and created temporary categories based on constant comparisons between posts, and between categories. The coder builds up, divides and merges categories to minimize within-category content variances and to maximize between-category variances. After coding reached saturation in the first round, the author let the text sit for about two weeks. For the second round, the author further adjusted the categories to increase its interpretability and parsimony. When the second-round reading ends, the coder identified five discourse categories and two types of emotion expressions altogether.

To enhance the validity and reliability of the coding system, we offer explicit operational definitions for each category and select text examples to build a coding scheme to share between coders (see Table 1). Throughout the coding process, coders used *Nvivo*'s memo and annotation functions extensively to record all fleeting thoughts or systematic reflections about each coding decision; so that the coder's reasoning behind each categorization decision and the boundaries between categories can be explicated with clarity. Also, we executed member-check procedures for qualitative content analysis. The author asked a graduate research assistant who had participated actively in weibo discussions about air pollution to read the texts in each category. While reading, his thoughts and questions were recorded and addressed to make sure that the categorizations make sense from an insider's perspective. His input was integrated into the last round of coding.

Based on the coding results, we first examined the content of weibo discussion in each category to address *RQ1 RQ2* and *RQ3*. To answer *RQ4*, we employed the cross-coding query function in *Nvivo* to explicate the interrelations between emotionality and different discussion discourses.

3. Results

3.1. Re-conceptualizing Chinese weibo discussions

Weibo discussions about air pollution is characterized by remedy attribution; causal attribution; regional confrontations; criticism of party-press and satirical allusion to established cultural forms. Expression of indignation or of sorrowful resignation is also common in discussion.

To address *RQ1*, we find that weibo discussion contains a large proportion of remedy attribution and causal attribution, which offer personal opinions on possible solutions or causes for air pollution. These attributions come closest to rational

Table 1
Coding sheet for weibo discussion.

Category	Operational definition	Examples (Chinese)	Examples (English translation)
Remedy attribution	Opinion about possible remedies for air pollution or criticism of existing remedial policies	嚣颖:基本靠天!人类啊毁自己容易, 救自己难啊!靠冷空气, 那春天夏天还来吗? 神也救不了了!种树啊种树啊! (2月25日 09:48) 喜剧厂沈阳://@音乐生活报王晓: "冷空气,你是老天爷派来的救兵吗?" (2月25日 09:46)	Always depend on nature (to solve air pollution). It is easier for people to destroy than to save themselves. Depend on cold wind to dissolve smog? What should we do in summer or spring (when there is no cold wind)? Even god can't help. We need more trees Wind, are you god-sent to save Chinese?
Causal attribution	Opinion about possible causes for air pollution	等离子体矩阵:回复@刘向平加油: 车辆,南方可不比北方少!! 如果连雾霾的真正原因是烧煤都不能承认, 我们凭什么治理环境?? 韩2009杨: 发展的畸形, 粗放型经济的发展, 这雾霾来的太晚了, 早点的话还能治理。 (2月25日 11:21)	The number of automobiles in the south is not less than that in the north. If we can't figure out that the real cause for air pollution is coal burning, how can we solve air pollution? Crude mode of economic development, rapid industrialization. This smog comes too late, if it appears earlier, it may still be solvable
Emotion: indignation	Expression of indignation at government performances or at public policies about air pollution	黑白胡须: 老天吹走, 毒害别人, 就是好消息? 为什么不说说治理? 是怎么作为的? (2月25日 10:11) 业委会通讯://@曹增辉: 无声的抗议! //@来去之间: (2月24日 22:10)	The smog is poisoning Chinese people wherever cold wind blows it! Why don't the governments focus more on how it is to solve the problem and what it should do? Silent protest! @曹增辉@来去之间
Emotion: sorrowful resignation	Expression of sadness or resignation about the gravity of air pollution in China	袁裕来律师: 我们就只能这样活着了 (2月25日 18:45) 水清则无鱼88: 靠天过日子, 这就是我们的环境。	We people could do nothing but live like this It is our fate to depend on nature to fix environment problems
Regional confrontations	Advocacy for the interest of the south (the north) and accusation against people in the opposite camp	hsingyu: 又尼玛要吹到南方来了, 次奥, 南北矛盾不在于暖气, 而在于霾! (2月25日 09:51) 莫港我霸蛮:冷空气对北方是福音, 对南方可是噩耗! 爽了北方人, 苦了南方人! 日! (2月25日 09:17)	Cold wind is blowing smog to the south again?! Damn it, the root cause for South-North discord lies in smog Cold wind is a blessing to the north, but a curse to the south. Southerners are going to suffer as northerners celebrate. Damn!
Meta-discourse: media criticism	Reflection and criticism of how Chinese media cover air pollution	锋将的潘趣酒: 身为监督的媒体, 不敢谴责…….。以后别装逼德帝 (2月25日 09:24) 天生含蓄: "救命冷空气明晚到来"算好消息? 真正的好消息是政府找到了治理雾霾的有效方法!! @人民日报 真能扯!! (2月25日 09:14)	As a watchdog, media dare not criticize those responsible for China's air pollution. Don't ever bother to teach readers morality again! Is it good news that cold wind blows smog away? The real good news is that the governments finally find an effective measure to solve the problem. *People's Daily* is full of nonsense
Satirical allusion	Allusion to and adaptation of established expressions (i.e., poems, movie characters, school motto) to ridicule air pollution policy	isoldfox: 江山如此多娇, 引无数任务戴口罩。 喜剧厂沈阳: //@音乐生活报王晓: "冷空气, 你是老天爷派来的救兵吗?" (2月25日 09:46)	Beautiful landscape if there are not so many face-masked people (revision of a Chinese poem authored by Mao Zedong himself) Cold wind, are you the god-sent savior? (adapted line from a Chinese TV series)

Note: Categories about emotional expression may overlap with other categories.

deliberation as conceptualized in public sphere literature. They explicate the causes or the solutions for the air pollution issue per se and use some reason to support personal opinions. Yet, a closer inspection of discussion contents suggests that they are disparate from deliberation in many ways. Though pertaining to substantive aspects of the issue, causal or remedy attributions on weibo are rarely driven towards decision-making or consensus-building with the intent to serve the "common good". Also, these attributions appeal more often to emotions of indignation or sorrowful resignation than to the force of rational-critical argumentation as a basis for policy agenda. Both types contain criticism or call-for-action that targets the political elites in China. Remedy attributions criticize or ridicule environment policies and remedies adopted by authorities or applauded by party-organ newspapers (see Example 1). Most causal attribution urges authorities to face up to the "real" causes for air pollution (see Example 2), and accuses irresponsible government administration as a root cause for air pollution (see Example 3). Comparable to "hasty opinion", weibo attributions in China's weibosphere offer "hasty blames" (Abramson et al., 1992). They feature acid criticism or sweeping negation of the status quo or of government policies by arousing and appealing to shared emotions. None of the remedy or causal attributions expand on the reasons why current remedies or causal attributions are problematic; or propose alternatives for further negotiation or for collective action. Furthermore, these discourses hardly respect differences. Netizens who speak for China's political elites or support party-organ newspapers on weibo are branded as "Wumao Party" (literally means gang of fifty-cent RMB. It now refers to people

paid by the Communist Party to manipulate public opinion in cyberspace), and relentlessly reprimanded. Most of the questions netizens asked about the cause or about the remedy of air pollution are rhetoric ones intended to emphasize discontent or to strengthen common emotions rather than to elicit real answers or to start conversations across ideological camps.

To address *RQ2*, we found that the expression of indignation and satirical allusions approximate liberal individualistic modes of political communication the most. Both are self-expressions characterized with few interactions with others. Expression of indignation mostly uses strong language against unjust or negligent authorities (see Examples 4 and 5). Compared with sorrowful words of resignation, angry remarks rarely respond to others or are responded to by other bloggers. Most are stand-alone venting. Satirical allusion consists of witty adaption of established cultural forms (see Example 6). It attracts many clicks but gains few responses. Yet, neither is exactly liberal individualistic in nature. Expression of indignation and satirical allusion on weibo bear Chinese characteristics. For the former, as name-calling and harsh ridicule of political elites are invariably censored by software or by weibo-hired human censors, the expression of anger often has to create coinage for safer substitutes. Examples include the mud-grass-horse lexicon to substitute four-letter-words; saying "taking a stroll together" to mean "demonstration on streets" (which is a sensitive word monitored by software on weibo); or the mention of "purchase a wristwatch" to mock the Chinese Communist Party's "Three Represents" theory (or that the Communist Party represents the interests of the people). Wristwatch has the same pronunciation as "represents" in Chinese. For satirical allusion, netizens create doggerels or adapt well-known sayings, mottos or poems for satire. This discursive practice is consistent with how China's literati discussed political issues in history. Liberally-educated intellectuals of the past often use sophisticated literary forms such as verses or couplets to obliquely express their opinions about sensitive political issues, and then share these clever literary forms of political expression among the like-minded. In contrast to liberal individualism, these clever coinages and allusions require great self-control and remarkable ingenuity for weibo users to circumvent censorship and speak against authorities in cyberspace. Moreover, self-disclosure of personal information and advertisement of personal works published elsewhere are extra cautious so that users can stay trouble-free both on- and offline in a (semi)authoritarian regime.

Regarding *RQ3*, we found regional confrontation to bear the closest resemblance to communitarian communication. It builds a hostile outsider image to advocate for the interests of a geographically-defined insider group (see Examples 7 and 8). But regional confrontations are not communitarian. Though south-north clashes are emphasized, no southerner (or northerner) clique has been identified on weibo. Instead of disengagement with outsiders, regional confrontations contain frequent hostile engagements with outsiders, but very few interactions with insiders to build an interest-based self-aware community. When conversations start, they are mostly harsh accusations or attempts to involve outsiders in language wars. These accusations claim that dirty air produced in Northern provinces is blown to the South by cold wind. Then, the move of dirty air is bitterly complained or associated with the malicious intentions or the lack of conscience for northerners (see Example 9). These discourses seem less interested in establishing an interest-based community than in instigating and escalating hostility between regional camps by moralizing political issues. Apart from language wars, no substantive proposal is broached to advocate for or advance in-group prerogatives. Contrary to communitarian groups, member of regional confrontation forums may be more fragmented and the least likely to mobilize for collaborations.

4. Emotionality and discourses

For *RQ4*, we apply *Nvivo*'s cross-coding query to examine the interrelations between emotionality and other forms of weibo discourses. In the cross-tabulation, the emotion of sorrowful resignation and that of indignation are placed in rows, and all other discourse types are put in columns.

The cross-tabulation shows that the number of indignant comments exceeds that of sad ones. This unbalance suggests that indignation about environment policies or about south-north conflicts is the dominant emotion on weibo. Moreover, angry comments are shorter than sad ones on average. A scrutiny of contents suggests that sad comments are longer for they respond more often to others. In weibosphere, when user A responds to B's prior comments, B's comments are cited verbatim in A's reply. Inclusion of many earlier comments from others makes sad posts longer. In contrast, angry comments are less likely to entail dialogs.

Specifically, indignant remedy attributions assign blames explicitly to particular individuals or to specific environment agencies. The blame is so pointed that some netizens directly address specific government agencies, demanding them to answer to angry accusations (see Example 10). In contrast, sad remedy attributions mostly do not target any specific parties as responsible. Instead, most of them show resignation either by lamenting the government's over-dependence on natural forces to relieve smog, or by uttering their concern over the gravity of air pollution in the country (see Example 11). Accordingly, sad remedy attributions wage less attacks on the government or on its environment policies, and their language is not as strong as indignant remedy attributions.

For causal attributions, sad ones associate air pollution to broader situational factors such as China's rapid economic development or China's position as the world's manufacture hub (see Example 12). Most of these causes are deeply implicated in social-economic structures and are hard to change by any individual efforts overnight. Sad causal attributions are also the longest ones on average, suggesting that they are most likely to involve in weibo dialogs. In contrast, angry causal attributions are shorter. They tend to blame "the conscience of some government agencies and businesses". Air pollution becomes a moral issue. In line with EFT literature, these angry attributions see the causes of air pollution as internal to and controllable by particular parties (see Example 13).

Besides, it is revealing that all regional confrontation comments are angry, and all satirical allusions are expressions of sorrowful resignation. Examination of their contents show that almost all regional confrontation comments question the morality of northerners who allegedly celebrated after cold wind blow dirty air away from their hometowns to the south after smog shrouded north China for days (see Example 14). Some confrontational statements depict the move of dirty air to southern provinces as a blatant shift of responsibilities by the northerners (see Example 15). No wonder Weibo ID 谁偷走了我的流年来不及说再见 exclaimed that "Suddenly I find northerners such horrible people". Indignation is elicited and shared by this frame of interpretation, which perceives the movement of dirty air as a moral issue that triggers hostility between regions of the same country. In addition, we discovered that in the list of comments on weibo, regional confrontations are often followed closely by angry comments from other users. We infer that by moralizing the issue, regional confrontation discourses may not only arouse, but also spread anger throughout discussions about air pollution in cyberspace.

Last but not least, online criticisms of party newspaper's coverage about air pollution are uniquely Chinese, too. All comments in this category appear on the weibo account of the *People's Daily*, China's highest-level party newspaper. The weibo accounts of party-organ newspapers have created a novel and more outspoken platform for readers to speak to traditional party media in a (semi)authoritarian media system. A new channel of reader feedback emerges. The numbers of angry and of sad media criticism are similar. Indignant media criticism criticizes the *People's Daily* directly for shying away from exposing the government's responsibility by reporting the blow-away of dirty air as good news (see Example 17). Indignant media criticism mostly speaks to the *People's Daily* directly via weibo's @ mark. In contrast, sad media criticisms are normally general and undirected. Most of them question in principle whether the *People's Daily* is really serving the best interest of the people, as government publicity claims it should. Also by using the @ mark, sad media criticisms respond to sad remedy attributions published by other bloggers earlier (see Example 18). As mentioned above, many sad remedy attributions lack a clear and specific target to blame. By responding to sad remedy attributions, the emotion of sadness is shared among weibo users and the *People's Daily* may become a convenient scapegoat to blame.

5. Discussion

This inquiry finds that: (a) discussion about air pollution in China's weibosphere is characterized by hasty blame to the government, clever solo play-of-words, and hostile regional confrontations. (b) Emotions of indignation or of sorrowful resignation shape both the form and the content of online discussions. Distinguished from the ideal of a public sphere, China's weibosphere serves mainly as a venue for netizens to vent emotional blame/criticism against authorities (or party-organ media as their speakers) or against non-locals. An alternative route to public engagement and political changes is described.

Distinct from a public sphere characterized by open and rational deliberation, these negative emotions and hasty accusations characterize almost the full range of discussion discourses. Instead of deliberating in-depth on the causes or on the solutions of air pollution, causal and remedy attributions are overwhelmingly emotional and critical of authorities. This may be explained by media system dependency. Media dependency is a relation reflecting how the attainment of individual goals is conditional on the resources media can afford (e.g., Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1979; Grant et al., 1991). The capacities to gather, process, and disseminate information constitute media's core resources in a social system. Weibo has the capacities to publish user-generated-contents; promote computer mediated conversations; and disseminate information rapidly in a multi-center social network. U.S-based studies found that people depend on the Internet mainly for information, entertainment and interpersonal connection (Kim et al., 2004). The situation changes in China. Chinese citizens have relatively fewer safe and appropriate offline venues to utter their dissatisfaction with or resentment of political elites. For them, weibo's communication capacities are critical to their freer political criticism. Compared with deliberation in western democracies, these accusations, criticism and emotions may hardly forge self-aware political communities or grow into rational and open argumentations to lead to collective actions or to build political agenda. Instead, a distinctively Chinese but equally effective route of political engagement emerges. These discourses deploy various tactics to establish a morally unjust culprit for people to blame; arouse indignation or sorrowful resignation thereby; and share these emotions widely among sympathetic citizens. Consistent with Lin's accounts (2011), when sympathy and public passion grow strong enough, they often gain moral superiority and press (semi)authoritarian regimes in China to political changes. This route of political changes differs fundamentally from deliberative democracy, an ideal built on literary gathering among bourgeois classes in Europe from the 17th to the 18th century (Bohman, 2007). By implication, weibosphere serves not only as safety valves (for troublemakers to vent their frustrations), or as pressure cookers (which inspire offline actions by like-minded activists) (Hassid, 2012). From time to time, it may also become a "public passion ferment" to press for political changes via the build-up of public sympathy both on- and offline.

Moreover, the clever play-of-words that netizens perform in weibosphere suggests that compared with individualistic self-expressions, China-style self-expression of indignation or of satirical allusion is neither single-minded nor uninhibited. On the contrary, it requires bloggers to exercise stronger self-control and consciously present their political messages in a sophisticated literary form. The aim is often to impress peers with cleverness as well as to outsmart weibo's censorship on "sensitive keywords". This discursive practice constitutes a novel form of online "cultural resistance' against cyberspace censorship in (semi)authoritarian regimes. And it draws heavily upon Chinese intellectuals' time-honored tradition to criticize, advice or ridicule political authorities with metaphoric and clever language games.

The regional confrontations in discussion suggest that rather than forging interest-based communities via insider networking, regional confrontations in weibosphere start aggressive language wars. They can effectively strengthen animosity and anger between different geographically-defined groups online or offline. In contrast to communitarian political communication, China-styled regional confrontations in cyberspace (such as the recent online mud-slinging between Hongkong locals and mainlanders) is less likely to nurture self-conscious citizen interest groups, or help with the mobilization of collective actions for the common good. Neither will the public passion thereby aroused produce collaboration or political progresses. Considering the finding that anger-charged comments are less likely to elicit responses from other users than sad comments, this prospect further suggests that regional confrontations as it is framed in China's weibosphere today may reduce the chances for meaningful dialogs to occur online. Dialog is an important prerequisite for reconciliation, mutual understanding and collaborative problem-solving.

Furthermore, analyses of the relations between emotionality and discussion discourses not only support but also expand EFT. On one hand, findings are consistent with EFT. Indignation increases remedy attribution and causal attribution to specific individuals or to particular government agencies; and the emotion of sorrowful resignation does incline causal attribution and remedy attributions to situational factors. On the other hand, we add to EFT literature by demonstrating that: (a) hasty opinions published in cyberspace are wide open to emotion's framing effects; (b) the relation between emotions carried by online texts and the contents of these posts is also in line with EFT propositions. EFT is more than a media effect theory; and (c) emotional expressions not only frame the contents but also shape the chances for social interactions in cyberspace. Compared with sad grievances or laments targeting the authorities, indignant comments against political elites are less likely to elicit responses from peers on weibo. Yet, when angry comments are targeting party-organ newspapers as convenient scapegoats, netizens often take the initiative to converse directly with party-organ newspapers on their weibo accounts.

This inquiry is limited in several regards: (1) we did not conduct in-depth interviews or surveys with participants of the online discussions. Results are based strictly on what the texts tell or what may be reasonably inferred from texts. Future studies could combine qualitatively content analysis with human-subject inquiries like survey or in-depth interviews to shed more light on the human intentions and motivations behind discussions. (2) In the cross coding procedure, we concentrate on the interrelations between the content of comments and the emotion these comments carry. Future research should employ social network analysis (SNA) procedures to further unravel the patterns how discussants connect into networks by citing or responding to each other in weibosphere.

Acknowledgement

Appendix

Examples in text

Number	Source	Comment (English translation)	Comments (Chinese)
1	九州大地笑开颜评论	After all, cold wind is the only thing that saves Chinese from smog!!!'	原来, 救中国人命的, 是冷空气!!!
2	等离子体矩阵	The air pollution in the South is as bad as that in the North!!! If the government can't even recognize that massive coal-burning is the real cause for air pollution, how can we expect them to improve the environment??	南方可不比北方少!! 如果连雾霾的真正原因是烧煤都不能承认, 我们凭什么治理环境??
3	肖雪慧 4	There are so many statues of Mao Zedong in Chengdu city. Mao deserves to breathe in more of this smog as mass destruction of the environment started with his reckless policies	成都毛雕像太多, 毛真该多多吸霾。对环境的大规模破坏始于他的胡作非为
4	爱哭的大喵喵	Damn it, one has to depend on cold wind for the improvement of air quality. (The government) does care to solve the problem thoroughly, shame on them!	去你玛丽隔壁, 什么都等着冷空气,不知道从根本解决问题, 不要碧莲! (2月25日 09:42)
5	请叫我-第一名:	Cao (a four-letter-word in Chinese), what else can better air quality? What are China's environment authorities doing? Are they paid just to serve the people by doing nothing? To them, I can only say I bought a wristwatch last year (referring to the three Represents theory in official publicity)	操,难道雾霾只能靠吹了吗, 中国的有关环保部门是干啥的,就这样为人民服雾, 是不是不作为, 对于这条好消息, 我只能说 我去年买了个表 (2月25日 11:31)

(*continued*)

Number	Source	Comment (English translation)	Comments (Chinese)
6	向日葵爱吃布丁:	The campus of Peking University is smoggy and the students refuse to breathe in. (The Chinese version is a couplet that adapts Peking University's school motto)	厚德载雾, 生生不吸 (2月25日 09:31)
7	HsuChihmo	I hate cold wind most, now. It blows all the dirty air from the north to the south. Damn it!	现在最讨厌就是冷空气。全吹到我们南方来了。冷你妹, 碧池! (2月25日 12:40)
8	曹忆嵘	@石蕊回归: Are their parents even conscious that people in the north are so malicious	回复@石蕊回归:北方人就这素质?你爹妈知道吗? (2月25日 09:59)
9	海蓝898:	How dare you! The cold wind blows smog away from your hometowns at the expenses of others'. Don't you have no conscience at all?	还卖萌, 艹!冷空气到了, 你那边霾是走了, 别人呢? 有没有良知啊! (2月25日 09:40)
10	华盛顿注意:	Cao (a curse in Chinese), why do we need these son-of-bitches who never do what they are supposed to? I would rather pray to the god of wind... Wind from Ukraine, blow this way!	操, 要你们这帮为人民服雾的孙子有什么用, 不如信奉道教, 向风神祈祷, 乌克兰的风啊, 吹过来吧
11	桃乐丝T9	We have to depend on wind to have clean air...what a life... sigh!	想呼吸点洁净空气都得看老天脸色~哎 (2月25日 09:54)
12	韩2009杨	Crude and rash mode of economic development. This smog comes too late. If, it comes years earlier, it may still be solvable	发展的畸形, 粗放型经济的发展, 这雾霾来的太晚了, 早点的话还能治理 (2月25日 11:21)
13	俊坚-随享	Certain government agencies and businesses have no idea about social responsibility and they lose all morality when lured by economic gains. Their non-committal working attitude and irresponsibility lies behind the smog problem	政府某些单位和企业的社会责任缺失和利益面前的道德沦丧, 以及 "多我一家不多, 少我一家不少" 的思想铸就了雾霾的肆虐 (2月25日 09:51)
14	曹忆嵘	Damn it that cold wind blow northern smog to the south. Aren't northerners shameless?	尼玛冷空气一来把雾霾带到南方, 尼玛北方人缺德不缺德? (2月25日 09:03)
15	等离子体矩阵	What was produced by coal-burning in the northern provinces should never be allowed to harm the south	北方供暖烧煤放出来的东西不要扩散出来残害江南 (2月25日 09:01)"
16	天生含蓄	Cold wind will come tomorrow night to relieve air pollution. Is this really good news? The real good news should be that the government finds an effective way to improve air quality. People's Daily, full of nonsense! @ *People's Daily*	"救命冷空气明晚到来"算好消息? 真正的好消息是政府找到了治理雾霾的有效方法!!@人民日报真能扯!!
17	陌上子青	Damn! *People's Daily* always views itself as the most authoritative medium in China. This is how it misleads people to shift the responsibility to solve the smog problem to the whims of natural forces?	C！好歹你也是自命不凡的第一煤 (媒), 就这样引导全民将治理空气的责任推到冷空气身上么 (2月25日 10:34)
18	评论员何家维	*People's Daily* serves the people; people's government serves the people. Who are the people...People have too many servants, but they can only live with the smog//@黑哥在深圳3世: yesterday, statues in Peking University were face-masked...//@袁裕来律师: We can't do much but live miserably like this	人民日报为人民, 人民政府为人民, 人民那个谁谁谁....好多好多为人民, 人民也只能这样活着了。//@黑哥在深圳3世: 昨天北大校园人物雕塑被戴口罩... //@袁裕来律师: 我们就只能这样活着了 (2月25日 18:52)

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