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**Working Paper**

## The digital turn in political representation in China

Working Papers on East Asian Studies, No. 119/2017

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

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Suggested Citation: Heberer, Thomas; Shpakovskaya, Anna (2017) : The digital turn in political representation in China, Working Papers on East Asian Studies, No. 119/2017, University of Duisburg-Essen, Institute of East Asian Studies (IN-EAST), Duisburg

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**IN-EAST**

INSTITUTE OF  
EAST ASIAN STUDIES

**THOMAS HEBERER  
ANNA SHPAKOVSKAYA**

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**The Digital Turn in Political  
Representation in China**

**NO. 119**

**WORKING PAPERS**

**WORKING PAPERS  
ON EAST ASIAN STUDIES**

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**NOVEMBER 2017**

UNIVERSITÄT  
DUISBURG  
ESSEN

*Offen im Denken*

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ISSN: 1865-8571 (Printed version) / 1865-858X (Internet version)

Download: [https://www.uni-due.de/in-east/news/green\\_series.php](https://www.uni-due.de/in-east/news/green_series.php)

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THOMAS HEBERER / ANNA SHPAKOVSKAYA

## The Digital Turn in Political Representation in China

WORKING PAPERS ON EAST ASIAN STUDIES, NO. 119, DUISBURG 2017

### Abstract

This paper provides a literature review and preliminary field observations on the topic of political representation in the Chinese cyberspace. The authors demonstrate that multiple new communication platforms are being established in the Chinese cyberspace. These new platforms not only transform conventional forms of political representation but also create new representative patterns, such as in cases of interactive and connective e-representations. They conclude that the proliferation of new communication technologies has been transforming the relationships between representatives and represented as well as between the state and society. Furthermore, in this paper the authors take their analysis beyond the description of the Chinese case and argue that the Chinese case also contributes to the Western theory of political representation. More specifically, they question the performative nature of claim-making and the role of “performer” and the “audience”. They propose two concepts of interactive and connective e-representations and further claim that the current developments in the Chinese cyberspace may signal a new digital turn in the theory of political representation.

### Keywords

Political representation, e-representation, cyberspace, representative claim-making, interactive and connective e-representations, opinion leaders, entrepreneurs

## 1 INTRODUCTION

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As part of the international joint project “New Political Representative Claims: A Global View: France, Germany, Brazil, China, India Compared” (2016–2019), sponsored by the German Research Association (DFG) and the French L’Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR), this paper deals with digitalization of political representation in the Chinese cyberspace. More specifically, the main focus of our interest is the question of how the new technologies in the cyberspace have been transforming political representation in the Chinese context. Based on an extensive literature review and preliminary field observations, we propose two hypotheses. First, the Chinese cyberspace provides new platforms not only for digitalizing conventional forms of political representation, but also for creating new alternative forms of political representation. Second, the new technologies are not only used as mere instruments of communication, but have been changing the relationship and interaction between representatives and represented and more broadly between the state and society in China. This paper contributes to conceptualizing representation in the Chinese context and in the Chinese cyberspace in particular. It also argues that political representation is taking a new digital turn that calls for a rethinking of Western political representation theory.

The main tasks of this paper are: (1) to conceptualize and locate political representation in the Chinese online environment; (2) to capture the key discourses on political representation and

the internet in China; (3) to discuss the authors’ preliminary field observations of online representative behavior; (4) to propose the concepts of interactive and connective representative claim-making; and (5) to contribute to the systematic understanding of political representation in general. This paper is based on a literature review and preliminary empirical observations in China. We do not intend to our insights to form a fixed theory on internet representation. Rather, this is intended to be a conceptual paper, providing basic thoughts and ideas on the interrelationship of political representation and new online technologies. Our insights have still to be substantiated by empirical findings and field research in China.

The paper unfolds in the following steps: (1) First, we discuss popular Western approaches to conceptualizing political representation and map political representation in the Chinese context. (2) We then introduce the Chinese cyberspace and detect within it conventional and non-conventional forms of representation. (3) We examine more closely the Chinese blogosphere and the role of opinion leaders as e-representatives. (4) The focus is then shifted to some concrete examples of online behavior and connective action among entrepreneurs. (5) Two concepts of interactive and connective e-representative claims are proposed and discussed in the light of the literature on political representative claim-making. (6) The final section summarizes the paper.

## 2 POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND ITS CONCEPTUALIZATION IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

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Before proceeding to the discussion of representation in the online sphere (often referred to as e-representation, digital representation or virtual representation, terms which can be

used interchangeably), we have at first to look at some existing definitions and conventional forms of representation in the offline environment. We also have to consider how represen-

tation can be conceptualized in the Chinese case.<sup>1</sup>

Initially, Hanna Fenichel Pitkin's seminal work defined representation as "making present again",<sup>2</sup> meaning that in political processes the interests and voices of citizens are made "present" by their representatives. Such a definition is apparently too vague to be empirically verified. But Pitkin provides us with a further definition of representation, i.e. that of "acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them".<sup>3</sup>

Proponents of another approach to political representation view interactive political communication and connectedness between represented and representative as the key to understanding how representation functions in practice. Stephen Coleman, for example, distinguishes four normative characteristics of connected representation, such as closeness, mutuality, coherence and empathy. In contrast, disconnected representation is characterized by distance, detachment, exclusivity and aloofness.<sup>4</sup> Building upon Pitkin's principal-agent approach to representation, Coleman further advances the concept of direct representation. At the heart of the concept are (i) two-way interactive communication between citizens and representatives, (ii) accountability as the central part of the act of representing, and (iii) the deliberative nature of

representation as opposed to an ad hoc aggregation of citizens' individual preferences.<sup>5</sup>

Michael Saward, in turn, provides us with a different conceptualization of representation. According to him, "representing is performing, is action by actors, and the performance contains or adds up to a claim that someone is or can be 'representative'".<sup>6</sup> He speaks of "claim-making", which is more flexible than the contention that a person is factually representing specific constituents or interests. A representative claim in this sense is "a claim to represent or to know what represents the interests of someone or something",<sup>7</sup> be it openly or tacitly. However, such a claim must normally be acknowledged (or rejected) by a specific audience.<sup>8</sup> This acknowledgement can be formal or informal, public or tacit. Saward highlights three crucial points of claim-makers: "(1) you are / are part of this audience, (2) you should accept this view, this construction – this representation – of yourself, and (3) you should accept me as speaking and acting for you".<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) speaks of the "alchemy of representation" through which the audience seems to create the representative, whereas in reality the representative creates the group by giving it visibility and a public voice.<sup>10</sup>

1 On the general discussion of the concept of political representation see Thomas Heberer: Reflections on the Concept of Representation and Its Application to China. Working Papers on East Asian Studies, Institute of East Asian Studies, No. 110, Duisburg (University of Duisburg-Essen) 2016. Online version: [https://www.uni-due.de/imperia/md/content/in-east/about/publications\\_green\\_series/paper110-2016.pdf](https://www.uni-due.de/imperia/md/content/in-east/about/publications_green_series/paper110-2016.pdf).

2 Hanna Fenichel Pitkin: *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley et al. (University of California Press) 1967, 8.

3 Pitkin 1967, 209.

4 Stephen Coleman: The Lonely Citizen: Indirect Representation in the Age of Networks. In: *Political Communication*, 22: 2, 2005, 197–214.

5 Stephen Coleman: New mediation and direct representation: reconceptualizing representation in the digital age. In: *New Media and Society*, Vol. 7: 2, 2005, 177–198.

6 Michael Saward: The Representative Claim. In: *Contemporary Political Theory*, 5, 2006, 302.

7 Saward 2006, 305.

8 Audience refers to the group of people who acknowledge or reject representatives. An audience differs from the group of people being represented. See David Budde: Formen der Repräsentation und ihre Legitimation. Die voraussetzungsvolle Anerkennung von Repräsentanten in der Politik. Working Paper No. 3, Center for Political Theory & History of Political Ideas, Berlin (Free University of Berlin) 2013, 65.

9 Saward 2006, 303.

10 Pierre Bourdieu: *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, Oxford (Polity Press) 1994, 106.

In the “West”, we find three different meanings: representation in the sense of agency (mandate) (German: *Stellvertretung*) in a distinct principal-agent relationship,<sup>11</sup> representation as embodiment (German: *Verkörperung*) of the represented, and representation in visible form (German: *Abbildung*), for instance that of visible minorities in electoral systems.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, Yves Sintomer made the helpful distinction between symbolic representation (“the model and the image”) on the one hand and “juridical-political representation” on the other. Both can be traced back to the original Latin meanings of “*repraesentatio*”.<sup>13</sup> And both meanings stand for the dualism between the political and the cultural strand of representation.

Pitkin points to another important distinction, i.e. between the dualism of “acting for” and “standing for”, which involves the dichotomy of political representation – i.e. acting on the one hand for or in the interests of a constituency – and on the other embodying or personifying a person or a group of people.<sup>14</sup>

Analyses of political representation focus widely on democratic systems. But how to capture the notion of political representation in the Chinese case? We argue that representation has a dual character encompassing both bottom-up and top-down patterns. “Bottom-up” refers to the issue of formal or informal elections such as local People’s Congresses, village leaders, social associations, homeowner committees, and to some extent the heads of urban residents’ committees. “Top-down”, on the other hand, refers to nominations by party and state authorities, delegates to the Political Consultative Conferences, leading officials, etc. Beyond bottom-up and top-down, there are also representatives who are tacitly accepted by the “masses” since they represent the interests of certain groups of people or specific ideas and sentiments within a community. These can be leading figures which champion the interests of people without being elected, e.g. in cases of petitioning, NGOs, mass organizations, the media, including the internet, social movements,<sup>15</sup> clans and lineages, temple associations, etc., or at least claim to represent these interests or ideas. Having said that, we understand that political representatives claim to act in the interests of *somebody* (a group of people) or *something* (ideas, the nation, traditions, interests, etc.). Normally, the respective claim should be acknowledged by a specific audience. The claims may be formal or informal, public or tacit. The audience to be represented can be an organization (the party-state, a mass organization, an interest group, an association, a group of petitioners, clan members, villagers, neighborhood residents, media, a blogger community, etc.) but also an idea or a concept.

Both in the West and in China, the key question of a disconnection between political represen-

11 See e.g. Thomas Schwartz: Representation as Agency and the Pork Barrel Paradox. In: *Public Choice*, Vol. 78, No. 3, 1994, 3–21, which raises the question whether the principal-agent model is compatible with our context. Grigori V. Golosov writes: “This model applies to situations in which there is a hierarchical relationship between two actors, one of whom (the agent) is expected to act on behalf of the other (the principal). The two actors have different interests and asymmetric information, with the agent having an informational advantage over the principal; hence the problem of ensuring that the agent is acting in the best interests of the principal rather than in the agent’s own interests. In authoritarian [settings, the authors] ... the goal of the principle ... is the maximization of political control.” See G.V. Golosov: Proportional Representation and Authoritarianism: Evidence from Russia’s Regional Election Law Reform. In: *Representation*, Vol. 49, No. 1, 2013, 84.

12 Budde 2013, 16–17; see also Karen Bird: The Political Representation of Visible Minorities in Electoral Democracies: A Comparison of France, Denmark, and Canada. In: *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 11, 2005, 425–465.

13 Yves Sintomer: The Meanings of Political Representation: Uses and Misuses of a Notion. In: *Raisons politiques*, No. 50, 2013.

14 Pitkin 1967, 60–143.

15 Charles Tilly points out that specifically social movements “center on sustained challenges to authorities in the name of populations otherwise lacking direct representation”; see Charles Tilly: *Stories, Identities, and Political Change*. Lanham et al. (Rowman & Littlefield) 2002, 53.



tatives and citizens is frequently raised. Wang Hui, professor of literary studies and history at Tsinghua University, a leading representative of the “New Left” and one of China’s foremost critical intellectuals, speaks for instance of a global “representation crisis” which he conceives of as a global crisis of political parties. He ascertains the existence of a thorough crisis in the political sphere, mainly characterized by a breakdown of representation. Party systems around the world, he claims, face the same political crises. Because of global transformation, political parties across political systems lose their capacity to represent the people. He argues that although political parties are still important today, they have lost their character as representatives of specific social groups and social movements (as in the 19th and 20th century). They are rather inclined to follow national logics and to distance themselves from the unprivileged classes.<sup>16</sup>

More precisely, in the Chinese context the increasing disconnection between representatives and represented is unveiled by the very intense discussions of ‘engineered’ elections<sup>17</sup> and *bei daibiao* culture. The term *bei daibiao* or ‘being represented’ was initially created by Chinese netizens, primarily to express online their dissatisfaction about the results of one particular public hearing on water prices in Jinan in 2009.<sup>18</sup> The

term then quickly penetrated the cyberspace and became one of the most used passive voice expressions alongside similar terms such as ‘be harmonized’, ‘be suicided’ or ‘be retired’.<sup>19</sup> These terms and many other ‘*bei*’s are an expression of *bei* society and *bei* generation, e.g. are a cry of deep helplessness and passivity of the ordinary people versus arbitrary use of power by official representatives. On the other hand, the *bei daibiao* discourse also includes narratives of people demanding fairness and the opportunity to freely express their political self. For example, one blogger writes in frustration: “When will ‘representative’ not represent power, but public will; when will we be no longer represented, but able to represent ourselves? This is the time when political democracy and wisdom can be motivated.”<sup>20</sup>

The picture might not be quite so grim in the Western democracies, but nonetheless is certainly equally and increasingly concerning. In his book “The End of Representative Politics”, Simon Tormey argues that the global crisis of representation, and a deep sense of disconnection between representatives and citizens as the essence of it, is due to a profound shift from a vertical (hierarchical) to a horizontal mode of politics that is accelerated by the unprecedented development of the information and communication technologies.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Stephen Coleman characterizes contemporary political representation as “the dialogue of the deaf”, pointing to the growing communicative gap between representatives and represented.<sup>22</sup> Both authors turn to new communication technologies as an important channel for novel opportunities for representative politics.

16 Wang Hui: Daibiaoxing duanlie yu “hou zhengdang zhengzhi” (The break of representation and “post-party politics”). In: *Kaifang Shidai* (Open times), (2) 2014, 70–79. An expanded and revised version of this article has now been published: See Wang Hui: The Crisis of Representativeness and Post-Party Politics. In: *Modern China*, Vol. 40 (2) 2014, 214–239. For a Western perspective see Stephen Coleman and Jay G. Blumler (eds.): *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship. Theory, Practice and Policy*. Cambridge et al. (Cambridge University Press) 2009.

17 Wang Zhongyuan: Playing by the rules: how local authorities engineer victory in direct congressional elections in China. In: *Journal of Contemporary China*, 22 June 2017, 1–16. Available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10670564.2017.1337311> (accessed 26 September 2017).

18 <http://www.baike.com/wiki/%E8%A2%AB%E4%B%A3%E8%A1%A8> (accessed 26 September 2017).

19 See Peter Marolt and David Kurt Herold (eds.): *China online: Locating society in online spaces*. London and New York (Routledge) 2015.

20 [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_a181bb3f0102v41o.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_a181bb3f0102v41o.html) (accessed 4 October 2017).

21 Simon Tormey: *The End of Representative Politics*. Cambridge, Malden (Polity Press), 2015.

22 Stephen Coleman: *New mediation*. 2005, 177–198.

### 3 THE CHINESE CYBERSPACE AND CHINESE DISCOURSES ON INTERNET REPRESENTATIVENESS

Through the effects of digitalization, traditional forms of political representation seemingly change and are being changed. The internet has generated new patterns of collective behavior, representation and collective action. It also contributed to enhancing and increasing political participation. In the following sections, we shall demonstrate the recent dynamics in the Chinese cyberspace and introduce popular discourses on internet representativeness in China.

#### 3.1 THE DYNAMICS OF THE CHINESE CYBERSPACE

To begin with, we should first clarify the terminology in use. We adopt Thomas Ploug's definition of cyberspace. For him, cyberspace has three main properties: spatial virtuality, reliance on the internet, and interactiveness. By spatial virtuality, Ploug refers to independence of spatiotemporal location. In other words, in the cyberspace the users do not need to present physically in one particular place and moment in order to interact. Reliance on the internet mainly means that cyberspace is dependent on the existence of an internet. Finally, cyberspace is interpreted as a space for interaction.<sup>23</sup> In this paper, we mainly understand the Chinese cyberspace to mean a virtual space for interaction within the geographical boundaries of the People's Republic of China.

The Chinese cyberspace is a rapidly expanding and evolving sphere. According to official statistics, in 2016 the total number of internet users has reached 710 million (compared to 668 million in 2015), including 656 million mobile phone users. Chinese internet users are predominantly young people, with 74.7 % falling into the 10 to

39 age group. Although urbanites are the majority of the total number of internet users, the number of rural users is gradually increasing and reached 191 million in 2016.<sup>24</sup>

The Chinese cyberspace is composed of multiple platforms that include websites, microblogs, e-news threads, online shops, chatrooms, forums, Bulletin Board Systems (bbs) and virtual communities. Statistics for 2016 show that WeChat (Weixin) is the most frequently used platform (with a usage rate of 78.8 %), followed by QQ-space and Weibo microblogging website (akin to Twitter or Facebook) with a 67.4 % and 34 % usage rate respectively.<sup>25</sup>

In recent years, smartphones have confidently taken the lead among new communication gadgets in China. Smartphones have become the decisive tool that connects people with each other, thus creating a digital turn in social communication. Cara Wallis classifies smartphones as a central tool for networking without boundaries and for constituting "selfhood, friendship and group solidarity", generating and maintaining communities and "a sense of belonging" or exclusion, enabling "immobile mobility" in the sense of "surpassing spatial, temporal, physical, and structural boundaries".<sup>26</sup> These new social media enable ordinary people to organize them-

23 Thomas Ploug: *Ethics in cyberspace: How cyberspace may influence interpersonal interaction*. Berlin et al. (Springer) 2009, 70–71.

24 Zhongguo Hulian Wangluo Xinxin Zhongxin (China Internet Network Information Center): Zhongguo hulian wangluo fazhan zhuangkuang tongji baogao (Statistical Report on the development of the Internet in China), July 2016: <http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/> (accessed 2 August 2017).

25 Ibid.

26 Cara Wallis: *Technomobility in China. Young migrant women and mobile phones*. New York and London (New York University Press) 2013, 5–16. Jodi Dean called these kind of blogging networks "affective networks"; see: *Blog theory. Feedback and capture in the circuits of Drive*. Cambridge and Melton (Polity Press) 2010, 91.

selves as a communication community. This, in turn, has not only created a new public sphere for alternative discourses,<sup>27</sup> dialogues and political and social deliberation. It has also spawned an alternative participatory, organizational and representative culture, engendering new sociopolitical dynamics and changing power relations.<sup>28</sup> Thus in China the internet creates new models of power characterized by mass participation, the production of content or products disseminated through social networks, grassroots and policy networks.

Collective activities organized by means of smartphones, chat groups or internet blogging are meanwhile scientifically classified as “connective action”. This is based on “individual engagement using technologies to carry personal stories” and functions as a platform for creating new types of networks.<sup>29</sup> These networks are sometimes labelled “E-communities of interest,”<sup>30</sup> referring to communities linked by shared interests across specific locations. Online chat networks are conceived of as “flexible organizations” which provide “online meeting

places”, coordinate offline activities, and create interpersonal trust.<sup>31</sup> However, these technologies are not simply an instrument of their users (netizens) which the state conceives of as a social and political threat and which it intends to censor, monitor, curb and control. Rather, these technologies have changed the relationship and interaction between the state and society in China. The state no longer holds the news and information monopoly, nor is it able to control the entire internet communication. Through the internet, state and society communicate with each other and netizens have the possibility to participate, to express opinions and social criticism and to monitor the authorities, particularly at the local level. This can figure as an outlet for social dissatisfaction, thus contributing to the stabilization of the authoritarian system by improving its governance mechanisms, its state capacity, and its input factors with regard to decision-making and problem-solving, and thus its legitimacy.<sup>32</sup> Without doubt, the state attempts to guide, control, confine and curb public opinion and public discussions in the internet in order to safeguard its concept of power and its function as a devel-

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27 A good example of such discourses, which are officially banned by the party-state but nevertheless broadly discussed on the internet, are the online discourses on the Cultural Revolution. See Thomas Heberer and Feng-Mei Heberer: 50 Years Later: The “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” in the Age of the Internet – Still Haunting China. In: *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 2, 2016, 209–236.

28 See e.g. Mirko T. Schäfer: *Bastard Culture! How User Participation Transforms Cultural Production*. Amsterdam (Amsterdam University Press) 2011; Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito and Danah Boyd: *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*. Cambridge and Malden (Polity Press) 2016.

29 W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg: *The Logic of Connective Action. Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics*. Cambridge and New York (Cambridge University Press) 2013, 196.

30 Ulrich Dolata and Jan-Felix Schrape: Masses, Crowds, Communities, Movements. Collective Formations in the Digital Age. SOI Discussion Papers (2), University of Stuttgart, 18, 2014, 16.

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31 W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg: The logic of connective action. In: *Information, Communication & Society*, 15, 5, 2012, 753. Regarding China see Jun Liu: Credibility, Reliability, and Reciprocity. Mobile Communication, *Guanxi*, and Protest Mobilization in Contemporary China. In: Sun Sun Lim and Cheryl R.R. Soriano (eds.): *Asian Perspectives on Digital Culture. Emerging Phenomena, Enduring Concepts*, London and New York (Routledge) 2016, 69–84.

32 Min Jiang: Authoritarian deliberation on Chinese internet. In: *The Electronic Journal of Communication*, Vol. 20, No. 3 & 4, 2010. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Min\\_Jiang7/publication/228305902\\_Authoritarian\\_Deliberation\\_Public\\_Deliberation\\_in\\_China/links/0046352f58c3d444ed000000.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Min_Jiang7/publication/228305902_Authoritarian_Deliberation_Public_Deliberation_in_China/links/0046352f58c3d444ed000000.pdf) (accessed 2 September 2017). On the issue of authoritarian deliberation see Baogang He and Mark E. Warren: Authoritarian Deliberation: The Deliberative Turn in Chinese Political Development. In: *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 2/2011, 269–289; Baogang He: Deliberative Culture and Politics: The Persistence of Authoritarian Deliberation in China. In: *Political Theory*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2014, 58–81.

opmental state.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, however, the party state is interested in communicating with the netizens in order to make the party state's policy implementation more transparent and accountable.

### 3.2 THE CHINESE DISCOURSES ON INTERNET REPRESENTATIVENESS

Increasing dynamics in the Chinese cyberspace have sparked heated debate in China, the most frequently discussed question being whether the internet can be representative of public opinion. Put bluntly, the key question asked is who represents who in the cyberspace and is digital representation of a political nature?

In China, the concept of public opinion (*minyì*) often refers to the "collective will of the people" (*renmín yìzhì*) and is an expression of "common hope and pursuit of the people".<sup>34</sup> The concept of *minyì* is certainly not novel and has been one of the most fundamental pillars of the state's rule and rulers' legitimacy in China for centuries. In contemporary times, the phrase "to respect public opinion" first appeared in the report of the 15<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1998; in the 16<sup>th</sup> report (2003), the whole paragraph was devoted to the question of *minyì*.<sup>35</sup> Most recently, much attention has been paid to the question of *minyì* and

the internet. Within this theme, it is often argued that the internet can hardly be representative of the public will. For instance, Gao Feng, professor at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, points out that two incompatible concepts of public will (*minyì*) and internet opinions (*wangluo yulun*) must be clearly differentiated. Gao portrays the internet as a "forefront of the battlefield" where public opinion (*yulun*) is constructed, manipulated and disseminated. He further insists that such a battlefield does not represent public opinion (*minyì*).<sup>36</sup>

In the same vein, Yu Zhigang, professor at the Chinese University of Political Science and Law, also offers a conceptual distinction between online opinion (*wangyi*) and public opinion (*minyì*). According to him, the former should be understood as individual opinions expressed online that cannot be representative of the diverse social groups.<sup>37</sup> Liu Hong, professor at Communication University of China, one of the few institutions that do in-depth research on new media and the internet, takes a more modest stand. He first acknowledges that the internet partially represents public opinion (*minyì*). But then Liu clarifies that public opinion represented via the internet is vague (*mohu de minyi*). It is vague for it is unclear if the internet accurately represents the majority of people; Liu points out that it may well be the case that the majority simply prefer to remain silent and don't voice their opinions online at all. Secondly, online anonymity makes it very difficult to understand to what extent represented opinions are true and real. Liu then contrasts virtual public opinion (*xunì de minyi*) with real public opinion (*xiànshì de minyi*). It seems that both coexist on the internet, accord-

33 On the concept of the developmental state in China: Thomas Heberer: The Chinese "Developmental State 3.0" and the Resilience of Authoritarianism. In: *Journal of Chinese Governance*, 4, 2016, 611–632.

34 Ye Jun and Dai Chao: Yulun: minyi de qingyubiao – du Liu Jianming 'Shehui yulun yuanli' (Public Opinion: A barometer of public opinion – reading Liu Jianming's 'Principles of Public Opinion'). In: *Dongnan Chuanbo* (Southeast Communication), Issue 3, 2011, 41.

35 Chen Na: Zhizhuo yu qifen de xinwenxue tansuoze – fang qinghua daxue xinwen yu chuanbo xueyuan jiaoshou Jiu Jianming (Persistent and diligent explorer – interview with Liu Jianmin, professor at School of Journalism and Communication, Qinghua university). In: *Xinwen Aihaozhe* (News fans), January 2015, 68.

36 Gao Feng: Wangluo yulun neng daibiao minyi? (Can internet opinions represent public opinion?). In: *Redian Touse* (Hotspot Perspectives), Issue 11, 2011, 12–15.

37 Yu Zhigang: Wangluo minyi bing bu biran daibiao minyi (Internet opinions do not necessary represent public opinion). In: *Zhongguo Sifa* (Judicature of China), Issue 8, 2012, 5.

ing to Liu.<sup>38</sup> Jia Baolin, professor of Nankai University's Zhou Enlai School of Governance, also differentiates between public opinion and the internet *yulun* and suggests that the internet only represents the middle stratum of society and leaves the most vulnerable members of the society from the lower class unrepresented. Such representation can be misleading and even lead to bias, especially when it comes to public policy making.<sup>39</sup>

There are also those who see much more potential in e-representation. For example, Zhang Gong and Deng Linwei name microblogging as the most direct expression of public opinion (*zhijie minyi biaoda*).<sup>40</sup> Qi Chunlei, Fei Rong and Fan Min, on the other hand, talk about challenges the CCP and government face in fulfilling the function of people's representatives. They see great potential in cyber democracy (*wangluo minzhu*) and call the internet a channel for democratic expression.<sup>41</sup>

As can be seen, the above scholars mainly challenge the representativeness of opinions voiced on the internet. They agree that the true public will should reflect diverse interests and opinions

of the people as a whole. The internet, however, can only partially represent public opinion and thus lacks representative power. Furthermore, even if some interests and opinions are represented through the internet, it remains highly dubious whether such representation is authentic.

The Chinese debate is not unique and essentially mirrors some general issues frequently raised by Western scholars in the public opinion literature. The idea that public opinion surveys can reveal true public opinion has long been put under scrutiny. Much research has demonstrated that neither social media nor opinion polls can accurately represent true public opinion.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the value of the Chinese debate is twofold. First, it brings scholarly attention to the question of public opinion and its representation in China. Second, it encourages a rethinking of the concept of public will representation in the Chinese context. Obviously, there is little doubt among the Chinese scholars that the idea that public opinion is monolithic and can be represented through top-down mechanisms is no longer plausible. However, on the other hand, the debate also vividly demonstrates the deficiency, if not absence, of analytical and conceptual tools for understanding rapidly changing dynamics in political representation stimulated by the new communication technologies.

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38 Liu Hong: Wangluo nenggou daibiao minyi ma? (Can Internet represent public opinion?). In: *Qingnian Jizhe* (Youth Reporters), July 2009, 23–24.

39 Jia Baolin: Wangluo minyi yu zhengfu juece (Public Opinion on the Internet and Government Decision-making). In: *Neimenggu Daxue Xuebao* (Journal of Inner Mongolia University), Vol. 39, No. 3, 2007, 29–33.

40 Zhang Gong and Deng Lingwei: Weibo minyi biaoda wenti de yingdui jizhi tanxi (Discussion of coping mechanisms of Weibo public opinion expression). In: *Hunan Xingzheng Xueyuan Xuebao* (Journal of Hunan Administration Institute), Issue 5, 2012, 19–23.

41 Qi Chunlei, Fei Rong and Fan Min: Wangluo minzhu dui zhongguo zhengdang zhidu de jiji yingxiang – jiyu minyi daibiao de shijiao (Impact of internet democracy on the political system – a public opinion representation perspective). In: *Hubeisheng Shehuizhuyi Xueyuan Xuebao* (Journal of Hubei Institute of Socialism), Issue 5, 2012, 6–10.

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42 Amy Mitchell and Paul Hitlin: Twitter reaction to events often at odds with overall public opinion. 2013. Available at: <http://www.pewresearch.org/2013/03/04/twitter-reaction-to-events-often-at-odds-with-overall-public-opinion/> (accessed 25 July 2017). For example, Pierre Bourdieu pointed out that public opinion can be constructed and manipulated and public opinion questionnaires are often highly problematic. See Pierre Bourdieu: *Public opinion does not exist*. 1979. Available at: <https://de.scribd.com/doc/73104573/Public-Opinion-Does-Not-Exist-Pierre-Bourdieu-1972> (accessed 26 July 2017).

## 4 E-REPRESENTATION IN THE CHINESE CYBERSPACE

The platforms offered by the new social media in the cyberspace are used on a daily basis by a myriad of actors for many different purposes, whether it is communication, shopping, entertainment, business or political participation and representation. With regard to political e-representation, we identify several fields where it occurs or can potentially occur: deputies of People's Congresses (PC) or Political Consultative Conferences (PCC) communicating in a direct and interactive way with their constituencies; government offices communicating with citizens; the blogosphere; online networks; citizen journalists (*gongmin jizhe* or *minjian jizhe*); celebrity representatives / opinion leaders on the internet as symbolic representatives, etc. These patterns of communication can be classified in two main categories, reflecting the two dimensions of e-representation proposed earlier: (a) e-representation as a digitalization of conventional forms of representation and (b) e-representation as a new non-conventional form of representation. Below we discuss the two forms in more detail.

### 4.1 E-REPRESENTATION AS A DIGITALIZATION OF CONVENTIONAL FORMS OF REPRESENTATION

By conventional representation, we refer to formal electoral forms of representation. Digitalization of conventional forms of representation mainly entails an increasing engagement of PC and PCC deputies, government bureaucrats, CCP cadres, and independent candidates in online communication with their constituencies. Through the application of new technologies, these traditional representatives seek to demonstrate their representativeness by increasing their responsiveness to citizen demands. Or, as in the case of independent candidates, cyberspace serves as a platform for establishing communication with their potential electorate.

As mentioned above, the Chinese top leadership clearly understands the growing importance and potential of the internet and is mainly pre-occupied with finding proper solutions to the question of how the internet and its users can be better managed and guided. The approach employed by the central government is twofold. On the one hand, a set of stricter rules governing internet use and censorship are introduced. On the other hand, an active engagement of party and government cadres and bureaucrats is encouraged and promoted. It has been repeatedly suggested that the CCP, the NPC and the government can improve their representativeness by actively engaging in cyber interactions. This encompasses Xi Jinping's call for the party cadres to increasingly engage with the masses through online communication as a part of enhancing the party's mass line work<sup>43</sup> and the call for the government bureaucracy to actively establish

43 For example, Xia Daoyu et al.: 'Zhengdang Shangwang': Wangluo shengcun beijingxia qunzhongluxian yan-shen de dangdai jiazhi yu shijian qishi (Ruling Party goes online: contemporary values and practices of the party mass line proliferation in the background of the network survival). In: *Zhongyang Shehuizhuyi Xueyuan Xuebao* (Journal of the Central Institute of Socialism), No. 2, April 2014, 101–105; Xu Yifei: Qunzhong Luxian: Zhongguo tese canyushi minzhu ji qi wangluo shijian celüe (Mass line: participatory democracy with Chinese characteristics and strategy of its realization in the internet). In: *Zhengzhi Yu Shehui* (Politics and Society), February 2014, 8–12; Zuo Xuesong and Xia Daoyu: Wangluo qunzhong luxian de zhexue yiyun, yunxing luoji ji shijian yanqiu (Philosophical implications, logic and practical application of mass line on the internet). In: *Zhizhengdang Jianshe* (Construction of the Ruling Party), January 2016, 56–59; He Xinyuan: Rang wangluo chengwei goutong dangxin minyi de kuaichedao (Let the internet become a fast track connecting the party and masses). In: *Renmin Luntan* (People's Tribune), 29 October 2016, 36–37; Wu Yunxi: Wangluo qunzhongluxian yanjiu de xianzhuang ji qushi (Current situation and trends in the study of the internet mass line). In: *Hubei Xingzheng Xueyuan Xuebao* (Journal of Hubei Administration Institute), Issue 4, 2016, 48–51.

channels for online political consultations<sup>44</sup> and online petitioning<sup>45</sup>.

The central leadership is mostly interested in collecting information on local governments' implementation capacity and by that in putting pressure on these governments to implement policies according to the local population's needs. In April 2016, for instance, President Xi Jinping demanded that all party and government cadres should follow the people's demands online, should learn how to use the internet to hear the needs of the people, collect benign opinions and suggestions and respond to the concerns of the people.<sup>46</sup> In response to the call from the central government, local authorities seem to be increasingly active online. According to Wu and Liu, in 2015 alone, about 107 petition bureaus at prefecture and municipality administrative levels set up their official Weibo microblogs to

interact with the constituencies.<sup>47</sup> Hong Chen et al. have shown that in 2016, one-third of all county-level governments in China responded to citizens' online demands, criticism and proposals.<sup>48</sup> PC deputies and PCC members increasingly communicate with their constituencies, sometimes even in an interactive dialogue via blogging where people can respond directly to their activities, reports and suggestions. For instance, in 2016 personal Weibo microblogs of National People's Congress (NPC) deputies Chi Susheng, Shi Guilu and Zong Qinghou had over 760,000, 620,000 and 410,000 followers respectively.<sup>49</sup> The number of comments on some of their posts exceeded 600 entries.<sup>50</sup> Connectivity to their constituency, particularly through blogging, is meant to give the represented the impression that their deputies or representatives are less disconnected and allow for a higher level of accountability, visibility and transparency.

In June 2016, the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms, led by Xi Jinping, adopted "Suggestions on improving implementation of closing ties between the NPC representatives and the masses". The "Suggestions" require the establishment of new working online platforms for improving the connection

44 For example: Huang Daxi and Dai Xiudian: Zhongguo renda daibiao 'wangluo wenzheng' xianxiang touxi (An analysis of People's Congress online political consultations in China). In: *Hunan Daxue Xuebao (Shehui Kexueban)* (Journal of Hunan University (Social Sciences)), Vol. 25, No. 1, January 2011, 130–135; Zheng Guilian: *Guanyu weibo wenzheng de lixing sikao* (Rational thoughts on the issue of political consultations on Weibo). 2011. Available at: <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/GB/16236122.html> (accessed 24 July 2017); Ding Xiling: "Wangluo wenzheng" shijiao xia de renda daibiao ying ruhe fanying zhenshi minyi (How PC deputies should reflect public will from the perspective of "Internet political consultations"). In: *Gaige yu Kaifang* (Reform and Opening), Issue 2, 2015, 37–38.

45 For example: Xiong Xiangyu: Gaige wanshan woguo wangluo xinfang gongzuo de sikao (Some thoughts on the improvement of online petitioning in China). In: *Sichuan Xingzheng Xueyuan* (Sichuan Institute of Administration), Issue 6, 2014, 9–11; Jin Taijun and Yang Guobin: Zhengzhi xitong lun shijiao xia chuantong xinfang yu wangluo xinfang de bijiao yanjiu (A comparative study of traditional and online petitions and grievances – a political systems perspective). In: *Suzhou Daxue Xuebao (Zhaxue Shehui Kexueban)* (Journal of Soochow University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)), No. 1, 2015, 7–15.

46 <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0430/c1001-28316212.html> (accessed 5 September 2017).

47 Wu Diming and Liu Hong: Shangfangren weibo yulun dongyuan de fangshi ji xiaoguo yanjiu (A study on methods and effects of petitioners' public opinion mobilization on Weibo). In: *Xiandai Chuanbo* (Modern Communication), Vol. 7, 2016, 130–135.

48 See Jidong Chen, Jennifer Pan and Yiqing Xu: Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness: A Field Experiment in China. In: *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 60, No. 2, April 2016, 383–400.

49 Chi Susheng's Weibo: [https://www.weibo.com/277334768?refer\\_flag=1001030201\\_&is\\_hot=1](https://www.weibo.com/277334768?refer_flag=1001030201_&is_hot=1); Shi Guilu's Weibo: [https://www.weibo.com/u/2714915210?topnav=1&wvr=6&topsug=1&is\\_hot=1](https://www.weibo.com/u/2714915210?topnav=1&wvr=6&topsug=1&is_hot=1); Zong Qinghou's Weibo: [https://www.weibo.com/u/1967388380?refer\\_flag=1001030201\\_&is\\_all=1](https://www.weibo.com/u/1967388380?refer_flag=1001030201_&is_all=1). All three accessed 5 September 2017.

50 [http://www.weibo.com/1935084477/FeJBHcnil?-filter=hot&root\\_comment\\_id=0&type=comment#\\_rnd1501839664051](http://www.weibo.com/1935084477/FeJBHcnil?-filter=hot&root_comment_id=0&type=comment#_rnd1501839664051) (accessed 4 September 2017).

between the people and NPC representatives. The document also calls for the establishment of multiple channels for people's representatives that would enable them to express public opinions more effectively.<sup>51</sup>

Of course, prior to issuing the document many NPC deputies had already recognized the importance of online presence. For example, in 2010 90 % of 97 interviewed NPC deputies agreed that online consultations play an important role in their daily work; and 7 % even wrote down their individual visions regarding the potential offered by the internet and submitted them in a form of suggestions to the NPC.<sup>52</sup> This is the case with the NPC deputy Huang Xihua, who has become an online celebrity. With over 350,000 followers, her Weibo<sup>53</sup> certainly contributes to her popularity. She has attracted attention from the media, which have interviewed her multiple times and dubbed her "Big Suggester" because of her active submitting of suggestions on poverty alleviation to the NPC and Guangdong provincial government.<sup>54</sup> Through different platforms, PC deputies can also communicate with each other. For example, in 2014 the PC representatives in Hengyang city, Hunan province established a communication group on Weixin (*Weixin jiaoliuqun*), where they regularly exchange experience and knowledge.<sup>55</sup>

Alongside individual representatives, local people's congresses are also actively finding their niche in the cyberspace. For example, the PC of Chongqing city's Jiangbei district actively uses QQ and Weixin platforms to collect suggestions and to solve some of the most urgent problems of the district, such as repairing roads and traffic lights. The representatives see themselves as a link between the people and the local government. To solve the problem of an almost unmanageable number of people contacting them daily, the PC invited volunteers to act as liaison officers and a link between the representatives and their constituency. This model of "representatives–liaison officer–people" appears to be very successful and is being considered by other local PCs.<sup>56</sup>

However, all these efforts require additional human and financial resources. Although PC representatives and local authorities understand the importance of involvement in the cyberspace, they are facing many practical difficulties. Among the most pressing is a lack of expertise and professional training. The difficulties experienced by the PC representatives are a reflection of a more general situation. This is when the central government requires considerable improvement from cadres and PC representatives in their social media skills, but provides insufficient assistance. For example, Wu Xinhua, Head of the Propaganda Section of the Provincial People's Procuratorate in Fujian, one of China's richest provinces, portrayed the situation as follows:

The new media have emerged, but what can we do? There are 7,000 employees at Fujian Procuratorate, but only 1 % work fulltime in the propaganda section. Out of this number less than one tenth has professional skills. There are al-

51 Wang Hongren: Sange chuangxin zengqiang daibiao lianxi qunzhong shixiao, Renda jianshe (On how three innovations improve the linkage between representatives and people). In: *Renda Jianshe* (NPC construction), January 2017, 31.

52 Ding Xiling: 'Wangluo wenzheng' shijiao xia de renda daibiao ying ruhe fanying zhenshi minyi (How PC deputies should reflect public will from the perspective of 'Internet political consultations'). In: *Gaige Yu Kaifang* (Reform and Opening), Issue 2, 2015, 37–38.

53 Huang Xihua's Weibo: [https://www.weibo.com/huang-xihua?is\\_hot=1#1504609957853](https://www.weibo.com/huang-xihua?is_hot=1#1504609957853) (accessed 5 September 2017).

54 Liu Hongtao: 'Wanghong' nüdaibiao changtan lüyou fupin, Zhongguo fupin ('Online celebrity' female representative talks about tourism and poverty alleviation). In: *Zhongguo Fupin* (Poverty alleviation in China), 16 March 2017, 36–38.

55 Lu Guoxiang and Chen Ruoxuan: Xinmeiti shidai de daibiaole lüzhi, Renmin zhengtian (Carrying out representatives' duties in the age of new social media). In: *Renmin Zhengtian* (People's Political Scene), August 2015, 6–12.

56 Wang Junhong: 'Minqing lianxian', 'lian' chule shenme? (Hotline with the people: what has it connected?). In: *Gongmin Daokan* (Citizens Periodical), July 2014, 28–30.



so about 100 young temporary contactors but their social media skills are almost zero. The Supreme People's Procuratorate, the Procuratorate Daily News and the Zhengyi Network (Justice Net) all regularly organize training in social media, but each province can only be assigned a small number of quotas, and for us it's only a drop in a bucket. Each year Fujian Provincial Procuratorate also organizes training for about 10 people, but this speed of training does not match the speed of rotation of temporary propaganda employees. We are thus facing a bitter, helpless and serious reality; a propaganda team that lacks creative skills in social media is like an army that does not know how to fight: it can at best pretend to look like an army and occasionally fire a couple of guns that cannot even reach the target.<sup>57</sup>

The state recognizes the problem and allows some limited private initiative. Thus for example, Alibaba, the biggest Chinese e-commerce company, has established a 'Taobao University' and offers specific e-commerce courses for leading county cadres.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to the lack of resources, two other significant problems exist. The first problem is caused by institutional constraints. It is not uncommon for PC representatives to have no legal power to deal with some requests. Furthermore, sometimes there are so many requests that a PC does not have the human capacity to address each of them.<sup>59</sup> This may create tensions and

misunderstandings that often result in mounting public distrust towards the deputies.<sup>60</sup>

This problem is rooted in a much more serious institutional drawback. It appears that there is much confusion with regard to the roles that PC deputies are to perform. There are four key documents that define the status and role of PC representatives: PRC Constitution, NPC Organic Law, Local PCs Organic Law and Law of Representatives for the representatives at the National and Local Levels of People's Congresses. Although all four include some general provisions, they lack specific practical interpretations and that makes the concept of representative very blurred.<sup>61</sup> According to most conventional practice, PC deputies are seen as a link between the CCP, the government and the people.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, his or her main function is to collect and express the opinions of the people and redirect these opinions to the people's governments, people's courts and people's procuratorates (this is known as "*yizheng liangyuan*"). PC representatives are also a channel through which the people can supervise the government.<sup>63</sup> It is this positioning of the PC deputies that is at the core of the crisis of representation in China. Jiang Zhitai, graduate student at the East China University of

57 Wu Jinxi (ed.): *Jiancha xinmeiti shiyong weike* (Procuratorate Practical Micro Lessons on New Media). Beijing (China Procuratorate Press) 2017, 001.

58 By the end of 2015, 1,572 leading county cadres had already been trained in issues of e-commerce and e-communication. In doing so, Alibaba reaches many local leading cadres and helps to expand their technical and communication skills. For details of this program, see *Qianming xianguan Alibaba peixun ji: you guanyuan zhi erweima wen zhe shi shaa* (On training a thousand county officials: Some officials ask what QR code is), [http://www.guancha.cn/society/2016\\_02\\_04\\_350362.shtml](http://www.guancha.cn/society/2016_02_04_350362.shtml) (accessed 19 February 2017).

59 Huang Xiaofang: *Difang renda daibiao lianxi qunzhong zhidu ji qi wanshan* (The system of local PC deputies connecting to masses and its improvement). In: *Renda Yanjiu* (People's Congress Research), Issue 5, 2015, 18–21.

60 Pan Guohong: *Tisheng renda daibiao lianxi renmin qunzhong de shixiaoxing* (On how to improve the effectiveness of PC deputies' connection with the masses). In: *Renda Yanjiu* (People's Congress Research), Issue 4, 2017, 38–43.

61 Huang Xiaofang 2015.

62 Fang Chuanhua: *Hulianwang + Renda daibiao lüzhi: jiyu, tiaozhan yu yingdui* (Internet + PC representatives' duties: opportunities, challenges and solutions). In: *Renda Yanjiu* (People's Congress Research), Issue 12, 2016, 20.

63 Long Zhen: *Ruhe liyong wangluo pingtai miqie lianxi qunzhong* (On how to contact the masses through the online platforms). In: *Renmin Zhengtan* (People's Political Scene), Issue 1, 2014, 43.

Political Science and Law, perfectly captures this point. This also constitutes the second problem that we have outlined above.

Jiang suggests that due to institutional ambiguity, the PC representatives are not really clear exactly whose interest they are to represent. The PC representatives are expected to represent both the people's common interests and the interests of their constituencies. However, in China it is the CCP which claims to represent the common interests of the Chinese people. When the two are in conflict, it is the group interests that should submit to common interest of all people.<sup>64</sup> As a result, the PC representatives predominantly perform the function of "collecting opinions" and do not actively stand for the interest of their constituencies. This is why those individuals whose interests are in conflict with common interests of the people do not find support from their representatives, and would rather submit a petition.<sup>65</sup> This ambiguity has been further illuminated by the internet. In the cyberspace, spatial constraints do not exist and anyone from anywhere at any time can approach PC representatives and this makes the PC deputies to seriously question their representativeness, e.g. ask the question of whom they do and don't represent. The existing laws and regulations do not provide a clear-cut answer. This problem of representative identity calls for a reconsideration of the legal framework and for a rethinking of the very concept of representation in China.

Furthermore, the idea of online presence and active participation of PC representatives in the cyberspace is without doubt the mainstream trend in China. However, it is also often criticized. For example, Cui Songtao and Liu Xuegui argue that traditional methods of collecting public opinion should prevail. They suggest that "real people's

will" can be understood only through face-to-face communication and this cannot be substituted by any technology.<sup>66</sup> Such criticism is marginal and ironically reveals the opposite – the important role digitalization already plays.

Finally, in addition to the digitalization strategy, the party and the government also endeavor to improve their representativeness by actively incorporating alternative popular forces that emerged in the cyberspace and whose influence over public opinion is rapidly increasing. More precisely, guided by Xi Jinping's suggestion to "enhance and improve work with representatives of new media,"<sup>67</sup> it is widely suggested that *online opinion leaders* should be incorporated into and become a part of the party's United Front work.<sup>68</sup> Online opinion leaders are believed to represent grassroots interests<sup>69</sup> and can therefore assist the party and government to enhance their responsiveness to the people's needs. It is also suggested that online opinion leaders can assist the party and government in managing and guiding online public opinion which, if not managed, can become sharply polarized, excessively politicized and even criminalized.<sup>70</sup>

64 Jiang Zhitai: Renda daibiao de daibiaoxing neihan yanji (A study of representativeness of the PC deputies). In: *Shanxi Qingnian* (Shanxi Youth), Issue 23, 2016, 81–82.

65 Pan Guohong 2017.

66 Cui Songtao and Liu Xuegui: Chuantong de minyi zhengji fangshi bu neng diu (Traditional methods of collecting public opinion should not be lost). In: *Renda Yanjiu* (People's Congress Research), Issue 9, 2015, 19.

67 Run Zhi, Ruhe kandai, lijie "Jiaqiang he gaishan dui xinmeiti zhong de daibiaoxingrenshi de gongzuo"? (How to understand and read "On strengthening and improving the work with new social media representatives"?). Available at: <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0604/c1001-27106081.html> (accessed 20 July 2017).

68 Xiong Jinzhou: Dui wangluo yijian daibiao renshi tongzhan gongzuo de sikao (Some thoughts on the United Front work with online opinion representatives). In: *Chongqing Shehui Zhuyi Xueyuan Xuebao* (Journal of Chongqing Institute of Socialism), No. 1, 2014, 38–40.

69 Wang Zhuli: Lun wangluo yijian lingxiu zai tongyi zhanxian zhong de jueze he zuoyong (Discussion on the role and functions of the online opinion leaders in the United Front). 2011. Available at: [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4bff4c090100v3of.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4bff4c090100v3of.html) (accessed 23 July 2017).

70 Xiong Jinzhou 2014.

This is an example of how the new social media have developed into a domain where authorities and the public can interact and communicate with each other, where citizens can complain and officials have to respond and react.<sup>71</sup> In the case of China, cyberspace provides an interactive alternative to traditional media. Whereas the traditional mass media (print, TV, radio, etc.) were “push media” pushing content at rather passive readers, listeners or viewers, the new digital social “pull media” allow for a direct, interactive communication between the producer and the spectator of news, comments, views or suggestions.<sup>72</sup> Digitalization of traditional forms of representation in the cyberspace can potentially enhance the accountability and transparency of representatives. Martin Karlsson further specifies that blogging by representatives can contribute to reducing the distance between representatives and the public, thus offering alternative and efficient channels with regard to the functions of representatives.<sup>73</sup> And although at present blogging by officially elected or appointed representatives and by party and government officials is still in its infancy, the potential for meaningful interactive political communication cannot be underestimated.

From a theoretical perspective, several questions call for further attention. Firstly, a growing body of empirical studies of the political blogosphere in Western countries suggests that although online political communication is undoubtedly rapidly spreading, it is of a strategic nature and often aims either to inform citizens or promote a certain politician or ideology, while meaningful

interaction with the citizens remains marginal.<sup>74</sup> Martin Karlsson and Joachim Astrom referred to this tendency as ‘top-down communication’.<sup>75</sup> Secondly, even if we assume that replication of traditional forms of representation in the cyberspace will significantly improve deliberation and governance in general<sup>76</sup> through regular engagement and better communication between official representatives and the people, will this necessarily lead to better representation? He Baogang reminds us that deliberation and representation are two distinct concepts and only a fine combination of the two can lead to better democratic practice.<sup>77</sup> These questions still remain underexplored and more empirical evidence is needed to properly address them.

Additionally, while the CCP, NPC, PCC and the government representatives and officials are searching for better ways to communicate with the people, another new and interesting phenomenon of independent candidates (*duli hou-xuanren*) has emerged in the Chinese cyberspace. Under Article 29 of the PRC Electoral Law, voters can recommend candidates to the people’s congresses.<sup>78</sup> The term ‘independent candidate’ is not included in the law and was created by the media to refer to candidates who

71 See the various contributions in Avery deLisle, Jacques Goldstein and Guobin Yang (eds.): *The Internet, Social Media, and a Changing China*. Philadelphia (University of Pennsylvania Press) 2016.

72 On the concept of “push” and “pull” technologies see John Naughton: *A Brief History of the Future*. London (Weidenfeld & Nicolson) 1999.

73 Martin Karlsson: *Covering Distance. Essays on Representation and Political Communication*. Örebro (Studies in Political Science 22, Örebro University) 2013.

74 See Cristina Leston-Bandeira and David Bender: How deeply are parliaments engaging on social media? In: *Information Policy*, 18 (4), 2013, 281–297; Darren G. Lilleker and Karolina Koc Michalska: Online Political Communication Strategies: MEPs, E-representation, and Self-representation. In: *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, 10 (2), April 2013, 190–207.

75 Martin Karlsson and Joachim Astrom: The political blog space: a new arena for political representation? In: *New Media and Society*, Vol. 18 (3), 2016, 465–483.

76 See Susan Khazaeli and Daniel Stockemer: The Internet: A new route to good governance. In: *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 34, No. 5, November 2013, 463–482.

77 He Baogang: Reconciling Deliberation and Representation: Chinese Challenges to Deliberative Democracy. In: *Representation*, Vol. 51, No. 1, 2015, 35–50.

78 Full text of the law available at: <http://mlpxfj.yn.gov.cn/show.asp?id=253> (accessed 1 September 2017).

announce their candidacy to the people's congresses independently from the party and government recommendations.<sup>79</sup> According to Liu Yangge, independent candidates have become increasingly active in the cyberspace and Weibo in particular. On Weibo, they apply different mobilization tactics to draw attention of the voters to their candidacy. They also establish links to other online independent candidates, learn and improve and even receive free professional support from some experts.<sup>80</sup> Although there are not many examples (according to *baidu baike* 30–50 persons<sup>81</sup>) of independent candidates and their online activities are considerably constrained,<sup>82</sup> this is a group with a high potential to lead political participation and formal electoral representation in a fundamentally new direction.

#### 4.2 E-REPRESENTATION AS A NEW NON-CONVENTIONAL FORM OF REPRESENTATION

E-representation is often conceptualized as "the potential offered by new media for a greater interactivity between the political and public spheres".<sup>83</sup> We previously argued that the con-

cept of e-representation in the Chinese context should at least encompass two functional dimensions. On the one hand, e-representation recreates and arguably improves conventional forms of representation and thus can be understood as a "connectivity-enhancing tool"<sup>84</sup> that potentially improves the traditional link between representatives and represented by means of new technologies. This can be regarded as a process of digitalization of traditional forms of representation. This process reveals how traditional forms of formal electoral representation change in the cyberspace. On the other hand, e-representation also encompasses informal non-electoral forms of representation, such as online self-representation and self-appointed representation and connective and interactive forms of representation. E-representation should be thus understood as a heterogeneous concept that consists of formal and informal, electoral and non-electoral types of representation in the cyberspace.

By non-conventional forms of political representation, we mainly refer to informal non-electoral representation. By self-representation, we mainly understand a phenomenon of "the self speaking on behalf of itself".<sup>85</sup> For example, implicit self-expression, as an act of a person or a group explicitly claiming to represent himself/herself/itself, can be considered as self-representation. Self-representation goes beyond individual behavior. Blogging or chat groups in particular are not only tools for expressing the attitudes, feelings, emotions and convictions of individual persons. By means of these technologies, individuals address issues of common interest, thus tying their distinct statements to public discourses and to a specific public sphere. In this way, different voices contribute to the public discourse as an agglomeration of

79 <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%8B%AC%E7%AB%8B%E5%80%99%E9%80%89%E4%BA%BA/6058381?fr=aladdin> (accessed 1 September 2017).

80 Liu Yangge: Xinxi shidai xia renda "duli houxuanren" xianxiang de xintan (A phenomenon of PC independent candidates in the digital age. In: *Kejiao Daokan* (Science and Technology), Issue 4, February 2017, 187–192.

81 <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%8B%AC%E7%AB%8B%E5%80%99%E9%80%89%E4%BA%BA/6058381?fr=aladdin> (accessed 1 September 2017).

82 See Liu Yu and Yang Qinghua: A framing analysis of Chinese Independent Candidates' strategic use of microblogging for online campaign and political expression, In: Peter Marolt and David Kurt Herold (eds.): *China Online – Locating society in online spaces*. London et al. (Routledge) 2015, 69–87.

83 Darren G. Lilleker and Karolina Koc Michalska: Online Political Communication Strategies: MEPs, E-Representation, and Self-Representation. In: *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, 2012, 190–207, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19331681.2012.758071> (accessed 1 August 2017).

84 Dolata and Schrape 2014, 3.

85 See Nancy Thumim: *Self-representation and digital culture*. Houndmills and Basingstoke (Palgrave Macmillan) 2012, 4.

multiple self-representing voices. This is precisely what Stephen Coleman means when he argues that (political) blogging is a “manifestation of digital self-representation,”<sup>86</sup> as well as a more direct and interactive mode of representation.<sup>87</sup>

Self-appointed representation is conceived of as the self that relies on self-appointment to speak on behalf of others.<sup>88</sup> Table 1 provides some examples of self- and self-appointed representations.

Both forms mentioned in Table 1 are political and function as representation. It is political in a sense that self-representation and self-appointed representation explicitly or implicitly challenge the idea that “it is the job of one set of people to represent another set of people”<sup>89</sup> and demonstrate that legitimate democratic representation is possible outside of formal electoral institutions established by state authorities. These forms of representation are representative because they derive from self-representation and are legitimized by self-appointed representation of the represented themselves. These two types of representation often merge.

For example, what at first looks like an explicit self-representative claim can in fact be an implicit self-appointed representation.

In addition to the two patterns of political representation mentioned above, we identify two new forms such as interactive and connective representations. As we shall see, these two forms are distinct due to their flattened, e.g. less hierarchical, relationship between representatives and the represented. In this relationship, the represented and the audience play the key role and have the power to select, promote or remove their representatives by means of intense interaction.

It is fair to say that the four are the least studied and understood forms of political representation. This is partially due to an implicit character of informal non-electoral representation, and partially due to a lack of available conceptual and analytical tools. In the following sections, we will discuss two case studies of (1) Opinion Leaders and (2) Entrepreneurs. We believe the two groups present examples of emerging new forms of non-conventional e-representation, e.g. interactive and connective representation.

**Table 1: Types of e-representation**

Type of e-representation	Claimant	Object of representation
Self-appointed representation	1. I represent 2. I speak for	Constituencies and ideas, for example: China, homeland, people, ordinary people, Henan people, workers, the vulnerable, women, group, you; quality, logic, morality, etc.
Self-representation	1. I represent 2. I only represent* 3. I don't represent others	Myself

\* Compared to ‘I represent’, the expression ‘I only represent’ re-emphasizes self-representation by explicitly excluding others.

86 Stephen Coleman: Direct representation. Towards a conversational democracy. Working Paper of the Institute for Public Policy Research, 14. London 2005. Available at: [http://www.ippr.org/files/ecommm/files/Stephen\\_Coleman\\_Pamphlet.pdf](http://www.ippr.org/files/ecommm/files/Stephen_Coleman_Pamphlet.pdf) (accessed 7 September 2017).

87 Ibid.

88 See Laura Montanaro: The Democratic Legitimacy of Self-appointed Representatives. In: *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 74, No. 4, October 2012, 1094–1107.

89 Thumim 2012, 8.

## 5 THE BLOGOSPHERE AND BLOGGING AS SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION

The non-conventional forms of representation can be traced on different cyber platforms, but most importantly within the Web-based micro-blogging space Weibo and Weixin (WeChat), a smartphone instant messaging application (together often called *shuangwei* or “Double Wei” in Chinese). In 2016, Weixin and Weibo had 889 million<sup>90</sup> and 297 million<sup>91</sup> users respectively. In the following sections, we mainly focus on the blogosphere and the role of opinion leaders who we conceptualize as e-representatives.

### 5.1 THE BLOGOSPHERE IN THE CHINESE CYBERSPACE

Blogging has completely altered the environment and mechanisms of political communication and representation. It has also generated new patterns of direct political participation and representation. As Deva Woodley argued, “non-media elites have begun to use blogs to survey and influence the debates that interested citizens engage in”.<sup>92</sup> It is a hotly debated issue whether blogging spawns political change.<sup>93</sup> It certainly has an impact on policy shaping and policy decision-making by impacting upon public discourses, debates and opinions. We agree with Yongnian Zheng that the internet does not trigger regime change or political democratization but rather can foster political liberalization by providing news, enhancing participation and impacting on policy shaping.<sup>94</sup>

90 <http://t.qqianzhan.com/caijing/detail/170424-8f9569e1.html> (accessed 5 September 2017).

91 <http://data.weibo.com/report/reportDetail?id=346> (accessed 5 September 2017).

92 Deva Woodley: New competencies in democratic communication? Blogs, agenda setting and political participation. In: *Public Choice*, 134 (1), 2008, 118.

93 On this issue see e.g. Daniel W. Drezner and Henry Farrell: Introduction: Blogs, politics and power: a special issue of *Public Choice*. In: *Public Choice* 134 (1), 2008, 1–13.

Particularly in terms of a blogosphere in which many people is involved, the “large number” effect plays a significant role. However, blogging is not only a benign instrument for creating a more liberal society, improving governance, participation and social critique (*Gesellschaftskritik*); it can also figure as a malign mechanism, i.e. propagating chauvinism, racism, cyber mobbing and human flesh search, creating rumours, or demanding more rigid authoritarian structures.

Furthermore, blogging is an instrument of public self-expression. It is by no means per se political. Some blogs are concerned with hobbies or personal interest, others with societal or quasi-political issues. For Crampton, writing on blogs is community-forging since it means “to be in a community”, a community of meaning, interest and like-minded people who are linked to each other, commenting and creating “fan signs” (e.g. “like”), even creating sentiments of closeness and friendship.<sup>95</sup> It allows for “the expression of ‘incomplete thoughts’”, and offers “forms of entry for previously ‘marginalised voices’” that cannot be expressed otherwise, and creates new patterns of remembering and rewriting history.<sup>96</sup> In this way, it constitutes a kind of everyday

94 Yongnian Zheng: *Technological Empowerment. The Internet, State, and Society in China*. Stanford (Stanford University Press) 2008, 186–187.

95 Jeremy W. Crampton: *The Political Mapping of Cyberspace*. Chicago (University of Chicago Press) 2003, 105–106. In Chinese, the word 博友 (*boyou*) already exists, meaning blog friends, for these kinds of friendship.

96 Stephen Coleman: Blogs and New Politics of Listening. In: *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 76, Issue 2, 2005, 277; see also Eileen Le Han: *Micro-blogging Memories. Weibo and Collective Remembering in Contemporary China*. (Basingstoke/Hampshire) 2016, 85–110. An example of this kind of remembrance and digital culture of memory is the remembrance discourse of the “Cultural Revolution” on the internet: Thomas Heberer and Feng-Mei Heberer 2016, 209–236.

representation; in a sense the blogosphere provides a platform for everyone to communicate and discuss common issues of everyday life.

Sometimes the given order of society is questioned without challenging the CCP, its power, its norms and its grand politics. Followers identify with these bloggers and their behavior so that the latter can “claim to champion the interests of the unrepresented, all those who don’t identify with politicians”.<sup>97</sup> Take for example the female bloggers Mu Zimei and Mu Mu who a decade ago challenged traditional social values by describing sexual encounters with various men or posting sexual content about themselves.

However, blogging as digital publishing of social content has a dual function. On the one hand, it has (at least a hidden) political function if, for instance, bloggers intend to influence the social or political process and social discourses either by publishing alternative news, impacting on their user community or on agenda setting, or by exposing abuses and misconduct by authorities or officials and making them public. Some blogs are thus oppositional or at least are conceived of by the party state as such. For Crampton, this is a kind of “resistance” since it “problematizes something which was not previously seen as a problem”. And – he argues further – “problematization is an essential part of resistance”.<sup>98</sup>

On the other hand, it involves a marketing strategy. Bloggers are also interested in maximum purview since the latter provides the opportunity to market oneself as a medium and to attain monetary or non-monetary benefits.<sup>99</sup>

97 John Street: Celebrity Politicians: Popular Culture and Political Representation. In: *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, Vol. 6, Issue 4, October 2004, 442.

98 Crampton 2003, 104.

99 Neil Washbourne: *Mediating Politics. Newspapers, Radio, Television and the Internet*. Maidenhead, Berkshire (Open University Press) 2010, 25–26 speaks in this context of a contradiction between public and commercial interests.

From 2005 onwards, blogging became more prominent in China, although the Chinese government has continuously attempted to control the blogosphere and its content.<sup>100</sup>

A specific phenomenon is the influence exerted by renowned bloggers and blog posts. We define blog posts as “a form of narrative that reflects a blogger’s own perspective and judgment on an issue, leaving the interpretation and evaluation to readers”.<sup>101</sup> Let us look, for instance, at the case of Han Han, one of China’s most popular bloggers, a professional racing car driver, novelist, occasional singer and magazine editor.<sup>102</sup> He figures as an internet opinion leader, shaping the views of millions of young people who are his followers. Weizhan Mao regards him as “representative of the ‘post-Eighties generation’”.<sup>103</sup> And indeed he can be counted as a specific representative personifying a large share of the younger generation.<sup>104</sup> Han Han himself claims to represent the “Chinese mainstream mentality while posing as the voice of common sense and rationality”.<sup>105</sup> Another example is the blogger Zhang Wumao who published the arti-

100 For a brief history of blogging in China see Rebecca MacKinnon: Flatter world and thicker walls? Blogs, censorship and civic discourse in China. In: *Public Choice* 134 (1), 2008, 34–37.

101 Brian Ekdale, Kang Namkoong, Timothy K.F. Fung and David D. Perlmutter: Why blog? (then and now): exploring the motivations for blogging by popular American political bloggers. In: *New Media & Society*, 12 (2), 2010, 219.

102 Han Han’s blog can be downloaded under <http://blog.sina.com.cn/u/1191258123>.

103 Weizhan Mao: Tiny Netizen Mocking Great Firewall: Research on the Discourse of Power and Politics of Representation in China, 2005–2010. In: Celine-Marie Pascale (ed.): *Social Inequality & The Politics of Representation: A Global Landscape*. Los Angeles et al. (Sage) 2013, 275–297.

104 See e.g. Han Han: *This generation. Dispatches from China’s most popular blogger*. London et al. (Simon & Schuster) 2012.

105 <https://cpianalysis.org/2015/08/31/a-decade-of-blogging-in-china/> (accessed 6 September 2017).

cle “Beijing has 20 million people pretending to live here” (*Beijing you 2000 wan ren jiazhuang zai shenghuo*) on his blog. In this article, which has aroused considerable controversy among netizens, Zhang argued that Beijing is overrun by outsiders, particularly migrant workers, and that China’s capital has developed into a faceless city in which nobody feels comfortable any more. Life in this city – so Zhang – has become unsustainable.<sup>106</sup> The bloggers who become an overnight sensation due to their powerful and appealing writings are another interesting phenomenon. This is the case with the Beijing migrant female worker Fan Yusu. In her essay “I am Fan Yusu”<sup>107</sup>, blogged in 2017, she told the story of dramatic hardship in her life. Her essay instantly went viral and became one of the best-read articles in China. She did not aim to become a celebrity; she was made an online celebrity precisely because of the representative power of her essay. She is now called a representative of disadvantaged rural women in China.<sup>108</sup>

Whereas traditional media widely represent official world views and narratives, bloggers such as Han, Zhang and Fan are challenging these media, representing instead the ideas and sentiments of specific segments of the population: the young generation,<sup>109</sup> Beijing urbanites and rural migrant women respectively. They have not been elected but personify and thus represent the feelings of distinct population groups.<sup>110</sup>

From a more political perspective, we frequently find blogs concerned with specific issue-oriented policies, from the public opposition to the establishment of the PX factory in the Eastern coastal city of Xiamen (2007), which made this project and the protests against it known across China, to the milk scandal in 2008, the crash of two high-speed trains in July 2011, the explosions in the Port of Tianjin in 2015, blogs uploading photos or videos from protests with regard to specific policy fields, or political satire in the blogosphere (such as the blog by Wang Xiaofeng).<sup>111</sup>

However, these activities are not directed towards changing the political system but are concerned with distinct policy issues, sharing information and discussing social problems and trends, lifestyle issues, values, individualism or individual views.<sup>112</sup> They question specific features of political authority and governance, sometimes challenging values or the moral order of society, thus speaking for people and ideas.

106 This article can be found at <https://xw.qq.com/cmsid/20170724A010XM00> (accessed 29 July 2017).

107 Full English translation available at: <http://www.whatsonweibo.com/fan-yusu-beijing-migrant-workers-writing-takes-wechat-storm/> (accessed 6 September 2017).

108 [http://www.sohu.com/a/141534785\\_131357](http://www.sohu.com/a/141534785_131357) (accessed 6 September 2017).

109 See Giorgio Strafella and Daria Berg: The making of an online celebrity: A critical analysis of Han Han’s blog, In: *China Information*, Vol. 29 (3), 2015, 352–376.

110 There were, however, bloggers such as the renowned artist Ai Weiwei who developed distinct communication strategies in order to trigger socio-political change. See Giorgio Strafella and Daria Berg: ‘Twitter Bodhisattva’: Ai Weiwei’s Media Politics. In: *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2015, 138–157; A detailed documentation of the blogosphere of the famous artist Ai Weiwei between 2006 and 2009 can be found in *Ai Weiwei: Ai Weiwei’s Blog. Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006–2009*, edited and translated by Lee Ambrozy. Cambridge, MA and London (MIT Press) 2011. In 2005, Sina.com invited Ai and other “celebrity bloggers” to open blogs in order to highlight them on its website. However, his blog was shut down by the Chinese authorities soon afterwards.

111 On these cases, see the doctoral thesis by Hai Tang: *The Politics of Blogging in China*. PhD thesis, University of Sussex 2016, <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/60111/1/Tang%2C%20Hai.pdf> (accessed 10 August 2017). Eileen Le Han 2016, 29–45.

112 James Leibold: Blogging Alone: China, the Internet, and the Democratic Illusion? In: *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 70, No. 4, 2011, 1023–1041 argues that the assertion that the internet would gradually subvert and change the Chinese political system is naive.



## 5.2 BLOGGING AS SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION

Next is the important question of how to conceptualize representation in this context. Pitkin's above-mentioned distinction between representation as "standing for another" and "acting for another" seems helpful here. She argues that in the former case, representatives do not act for others. Rather, they stand for them "by virtue of a correspondence or connection between them, a resemblance or reflection". Not what the representatives do but what they are is crucial here. For Pitkin, their representation is "not acting with authority, or acting before being held to account, or any kind of acting at all. Rather, it depends on the representative's characteristics".<sup>113</sup> It is a kind of "symbolic" representation, i.e. a relationship symbolizing a constituency of followers who believe in the statements of the celebrity representatives and develop a feeling of representativeness through her or his ideas, arguments, rationales conceiving of her or him as "people who think and act as we do".<sup>114</sup> This pattern of representation, i.e. representation in the above mentioned sense as embodiment (German: Verkörperung) of the represented or in Pitkin's words "standing for" is the essence of symbolic representation. In this context, symbolic representation pertains to "the codes through which people, values and claims are symbolised in words, pictures or narratives".<sup>115</sup> "Media content," writes Neil Washbourne, "consists of symbolic representations."<sup>116</sup> In the blogging field of mutual communication, "politics and public life are played out ... [and] the meanings of public life are generated, debated and evaluated."<sup>117</sup>

113 Pitkin 1967, 61.

114 From the literature we know that users are looking for blogs that reflect their own views and standpoints, see e.g. Ekdale et al. 2010, 219.

115 Washbourne 2010, 17.

116 Washbourne 2010, 17.

117 Geoffrey Craig: *The Media, Politics and Public Life*, Crows Nest (Allen & Unwin) 2004, 4.

The new social media and especially blogging have created a new public sphere ("mediated public life"<sup>118</sup>) where people are communicating, debating and framing public discourses and values.<sup>119</sup>

The digital sphere has led to a fragmentation of the "public sphere" (in German "Öffentlichkeit") as a domain in social life where people gather in order to communicate social and political issues. John Keane has pointed out that with the erosion of "the state-structured public life", multiplied spaces of communication have emerged. He differentiates between a "micro-public sphere" at the local level where smaller communication communities interact, a "meso-public sphere" in which a large number of people discuss, and the "macro-public sphere", i.e. the supranational and global sphere.<sup>120</sup> This differentiation clarifies that even small-number communication can be conceived of as a public sphere. Such a differentiation fits well into classifying the blogging sphere and shows that small communication groups can also be counted as part of an overarching public sphere.

Blogging as a form of symbolic representation makes ideational meanings such as self-images, beliefs, values, perceptions of politics, etc.

118 John B. Thompson, op. cit. in Washbourne 2010, 21. More on the mediated public: John B. Thompson: *The Media and Modernity. A Social Theory of the Media*. Cambridge and Oxford (Polity Press) 1995.

119 It is precisely the public sphere in the sense of Jürgen Habermas' ideal type as a discursive and interactional process. See J. Habermas: *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. Frankfurt am Main. (Suhrkamp), 5th edition, 1990. Jodi Dean denies that the internet constitutes a public sphere, since it would damage practices of democracy. See: Why the Net is not a Public Sphere. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, Issue 1, 2003, 95–112. In contrast, Scott Wright discerns in the blogosphere a new form of representation; see: Political blogs, representation and the public sphere. In: *Aslib Proceedings*, Vol. 61, Issue 2, 2009, 155–169.

120 John Keane: Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. In: *The Communication Review*, 1 (1) 1995, 1–22.

digitally present. The opinion leaders or celebrity representatives stand for framing the public space, its discourses and building of online networks. Her or his fans conceive of these persons as their symbolic representatives.<sup>121</sup> In this sense, John Street understands fandom as a typical form of modern (political) representation since it “entails formation of relations of ‘intimacy with distant others.’”<sup>122</sup> Where the state attempts to hegemonize and monitor political communication, as in China communication finds its expression in seemingly non-political domains such as arts, sports, religion or blogging fandom.

The latter, however, may become more difficult in future. In August 2017, China announced new rules to manage internet forums and internet communication. The new regulations provide that from October 2017, unidentified users are not allowed to post anything on internet platforms. Internet companies and service companies are responsible for managing the content posted by registered users to ensure that all users verify their identity before posting anything on their platforms. Undoubtedly, this is a constraint on and stronger supervision of the public discourse. It remains to be seen what this means for the issue of political representation in the future.<sup>123</sup>

## 6 OPINION LEADERS AS E-REPRESENTATIVES

Among bloggers, we distinguish an important category of Opinion Leaders who by means of their blogging act as e-representatives. We suggest that the source of the growing influence of online OLs lies in their representativeness.

### 6.1 WHO ARE OPINION LEADERS?

In the Chinese literature and official documents, the term “Opinion Leaders” (OL) is often used interchangeably with other terms such as new opinion leaders (*xin yijian lingxiu*), opinion repre-

sentatives (*yijian daibiao*) and public opinion leaders (*yulun lingxiu*).<sup>124</sup> OL is referred to as a vast and diverse group of influential internet users that emerged and spread in the Chinese cyberspace in the last two decades. OLs come from very diverse backgrounds: They are scholars, media workers, members of the business elite, writers, celebrities, grassroots activists and even government officials.<sup>125</sup> When it comes to evaluation of the role of the OLs, we observe some very polarized views. Some portray OLs as online heroes<sup>126</sup> of modern times and represen-

121 Fang and Literat have found out that fandom networks engender not only shared interests but also strong collective identities and a kind of “affective engagement”; see Yuyan Feng and Ioana Literat: Redefining Relations between Creators and Audiences in the Digital Age: The Social Production and Consumption of Chinese Internet Literature. In: *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 2017, 2596.

122 Street 2004, 447. See also Thompson 1995.

123 Hulianwang gentie pinglun fuwu guanli guiding (Regulation to manage internet forums and communities). Available at: [http://www.cac.gov.cn/2017-08/25/c\\_1121541842.htm](http://www.cac.gov.cn/2017-08/25/c_1121541842.htm) (accessed 3 September 2017).

124 Some other definitions also exist, but are less widespread. For example, Zhou Qihong narrows the sphere of activities of OLs to forums and speaks of ‘forum leaders’ (*luntan lingdao*), e.g. OLs as active managers of forums. Zhou Qihong: Wangluo luntan lingdao de xinli pinzhi fenxi (Psychological analysis of the online forum leaders). In: *Gansu Keji Jiaoyu Zonglan* (The Journal of Gansu Science and Education), Vol. 36, No. 3, 2007, 81.

125 Xiong Jinzhou 2014.

126 Lu Guoping in “Weibo huayu ‘baquan’ de ji ge zhuiwen” (Several questions on Weibo discourse hegemony), Renmin luntan wenjuan diaocha zhongxin (People’s Tribune Survey Centre), April 2013.

tatives of people's voices, while others accuse OLs of spreading rumors<sup>127</sup>, twisting the history of the CCP and even denying the leading role of the Party.<sup>128</sup> This broad spectrum of views reveals two main points: That OLs have become an integral part of virtual communication and that the group is rather heterogeneous.

To detect an OL in a sea of internet users, the most frequently employed criteria are (1) number of followers and posts; (2) number of comments and reposts; (3) verification of identity; and (4) frequency of online activity and presence.<sup>129</sup> Thus an OL has a verified identity and a large number of followers, actively produces posts and comments on popular posts by other users, and his/her posts are widely reposted and commented on. The Chinese online term “大V” (Big V, where V stands for “verified”) precisely refers to this type of user.

However, it has been already noted that such criteria are oversimplistic and do not accurately explain the reality. Firstly, ‘followers’ or fans

(*fensi*) can be active and inactive; some have subscribed and actively follow, repost and comment, while others do not engage or even visit at all. Ma Xiaolin, a CEO and popular microblogger with almost two million subscribers<sup>130</sup> at Weibo, distinguishes between “alive fans” (*huo fensi*), e.g. active followers and “zombie fans” (*jiangshifen*), e.g. those who subscribe but never follow or comment.<sup>131</sup> To draw a clear distinction between these two groups is difficult, so relying on pure statistical numbers of followers seems at least problematic.

Secondly, these criteria also create confusion between OLs and other popular online groups, such as internet celebrities (*wangluo hongren* or *wanghong*). In contrast to internet celebrities, whose focus mainly revolves around their personality and fame, OLs produce original opinions<sup>132</sup> and appealing representative statements. They have outstanding writing skills and a bright intellectual capacity that are appealing to the audience. According to Luo Min and Wang Chengshun, 89 % of OLs have a university degree. 72 % of OLs are professional media workers and public intellectuals.<sup>133</sup> OLs offer opinions that are not only profes-

127 On how rumors and fraud are created and spread on Weibo see Lu Pudan: Weibo yijian lingxiu guibi yaoyan chuanbo de duice yanjiu (A research study on countermeasures for avoiding online fraud by the opinion leaders). In: *Xinwen Yanjiu Daokan* (Journal of News Research), Vol.7, No.1, 2016, 36–41.

128 Li Mingde, Li Juxing, Liu Chanjun and Gao Ru: Wangluo yuqing zhong fazhengzhixua xianxiang de dongle jizhi yu yinying celve yanjiu (A study on the motive mechanism and coping strategies of pan-politicization in online public opinion). In: *Qingbao Zazhi* (Journal of Intelligence), Vol. 35, No. 4, 2016, 49.

129 For example, see Wang Canfa and Li Tingting: Qunzhongxing shijian zhong weibo yulun lingxiu lingxiu yijian de xingcheng, kuosan moshi ji yindao celve tantao (On the formation, diffusion mode and guiding strategy of microblogging opinion leaders in mass events). In: *Xiandai Chuanbo* (Modern Communication), Issue 3, 2013; Sang Liangxu and Zheng Lin: Weibo yijian lingxiu de xingcheng jizhi ji qi yingxiang (On formation and influence of the Weibo opinion leaders). In: *Xinwen Yu Chuanbo Yanjiu* (Journalism and Communication), Issue 3, 2011.

130 Ma Xiaolin's blog available at: [http://www.weibo.com/u/1676160070?is\\_hot=1](http://www.weibo.com/u/1676160070?is_hot=1) (accessed 29 August 2017).

131 Weibo huayu 'baquan' de ji ge zhuiwen (Several questions on Weibo discourse hegemony). Renmin luntan wenjuan diaocha zhongxin (People's Tribune Survey Centre), April 2013.

132 Bai Gui and Wang Qiuju include “originality” as an important criterion for identifying OLs and measuring their influence. See Bai Gui and Wang Qiuju: Weibo yijian lingxiu yingxiangli yu qi goucheng yaosujian de guanxi (The relationship between the influence of opinion leaders and their constitutive factors). In: *Hebei Xuekan* (Hebei Academic Journal), Vol. 33, No.2, 2013, 171–174.

133 Luo Min and Wang Chengshun: Wangluo yijian lingxiu jiben tezhen de tanjiu (An analysis of basic characteristics of the online opinion leaders) In: *Guangdong Qingnian Zhiye Xueyuan Xuebao* (Journal of Guangdong Youth Vocational College), Vol.30, No.1, 2016, 17–22.

sional but also thorough, authentic and daring.<sup>134</sup> It is thus their intellectual capacity that is appreciated most by their followers. Another distinguishing feature of OLs is their active interaction with their audience.<sup>135</sup> OLs not only provide their views and opinions through posting and reposting, but also actively engage in online discussions and are open to criticism and scrutiny. This authenticity and openness to interaction are what makes them stand out in the cyberspace. Some studies have therefore suggested that instead of concentrating on the number of followers, OLs can be better identified by focusing on and measuring interaction, network positioning and influence of their opinions.<sup>136</sup>

Thirdly, the above criteria do not take into account Middle and Small Vs, which have been rapidly proliferating in the blogosphere. Middle and Small Vs may not have as many followers as Big Vs, but nevertheless exert a profound influence on their followers. For example, university student OLs who have become increasingly popular, particularly on Weixin, are usually considered as mind-shaping role models for students. Online, they perform different roles, for example as journalists, editors, commentators, interviewees, special guests or student representatives and are called the “life and soul” of

Weixin student communities.<sup>137</sup> Another example is the second generation of migrant worker OLs. This group of OLs are young people with a rural *hukou*<sup>138</sup> studying, working and living in urban areas. They are most outspoken and popular within the migrant worker online communities. Ou Tingyu, for instance, explains their rise as a result of persistent prejudice against migrant workers and their children in the cities, which pushed migrant youth to form their own online communities.<sup>139</sup>

Another interesting example is the emergence of village OLs. According to a 2014 analysis published on peoples.com.cn, the most active segment of internet users comes from the grassroots.<sup>140</sup> This group of users also has grassroots OLs with village OLs being part of it. Village OLs are rural elites with strong communication and coordination skills.<sup>141</sup> They act as representa-

134 Ibid., 20.

135 Cao Jinsong: ‘Wangluo yijian lingxiu’ shi zenyang liancheng de? (What does it take to become an online opinion leader?). In: *Dangde Shenghuo* (The Party Life), October 2011, 10–11.

136 For example, see Wu Xindong, Li Yi and Li Lei: Zaixian shejiao wangluo yingxiangli fenxi (Influence Analysis of Online Social Networks). In: *Jisuanji Xuebao* (Chinese Journal of Computers), Vol. 37, No.4, 2014, 735–752; Fan Xinghua, Zhao Jing and Fang Binxing: Yingxiangli kuosan gailü moxing ji qi yongyu yijian lingxiu faxian yanjiu (Influence diffusion probability model and its application to identifying network opinion leaders). In: *Jisuanji Xuebao* (Chinese Journal of Computers), Vol. 36, No. 2, 2013, 360–367.

137 Li Liangcheng: Weixin xia daxuesheng yijian lingxiu de fazhan, yingyong ji qi qishi (Development, application and implications of the Weixin student opinion leaders). In: *Wenyi Shenghuo* (Literature Life), December 2016, 266–268.

138 *Hukou* (户口制度) is a household registration system that identifies an individual person as a resident of a particular geographical area.

139 Ou Tingyu: Xinchengdai nongmingong ‘Wangluo yijian lingxiu’ de peiyu yanjiu (On cultivation of online opinion leaders among new generation migrant workers). In: *Jiaoyu Peixun* (Educational training), 2016, 64–68.

140 Niandu yuqing baogao: weibo yulunchang ji qi ‘yijian lingxiu’ zuoyong jizhi jixi (Annual report on public opinion: an analysis of the role of opinion leaders on Weibo). Full text of the report available at: <http://yuqing.people.com.cn/n/2014/1231/c354318-26305929.html> (accessed 30 August 2017).

141 Liu Ying and Li Jing: Lun nongcun yijian lingxiu dui nongcun diqu makesizhuyi dazhonghua de yingxiang (On the impact of village opinion leaders on proliferation of Marxist values in rural areas). In: *Changchun Jiaoyu Xueyuan Xuebao* (Journal of Changchun Education Institute), Vol. 31, No. 21, 2015, 10–12.

tives of local interest groups<sup>142</sup> and more broadly of local demands and grassroots voices.<sup>143</sup> Their role is not limited to the transmission of government policies and party ideology. They also provide the villagers with their opinions and interpretations of official information. Weixin is the most popular platform, as it does not require a high level of literacy; its communication with the use of photos only also appears very efficient and is popular among villagers.<sup>144</sup>

Yet another very interesting observation regarding the concept of OLs is offered by Zhu Yang and Professor Zhang Ruli from Beijing Normal University. They suggest that the concept of OLs includes two distinct meanings: OL as a person (*wangluo yijian lingxiuren*) and OL as a post (*wangluo yijian lingxiutie*). OLs do not always produce opinion-leading posts; and opinion-leading posts can be produced by a non-opinion leader. Zhu and Zhang continue by pointing out that much attention is paid to OLs as persons, while the content and effects of opinion-leading posts remain underexplored.<sup>145</sup>

To sum up, opinion leaders may not represent internet users or bloggers in general or mainstream public opinion. Rather, they have the capacity to influence the direction of public opinion

of a certain audience by means of the internet.<sup>146</sup> They figure as “celebrity politicians” or “celebrity representatives”, a term referring to people who, “via mass media, enjoy a greater presence and wider scope of activity and agency than are those who make up the rest of the population”.<sup>147</sup> Celebrity figures harness their popularity to address specific issues in an attempt to influence policies or at least public opinion.<sup>148</sup> Most of them are people well known by the public such as TV stars, business leaders, or prominent scholars, writers, politicians or artists. As a rule, their blogs have a large number of followers.<sup>149</sup> Their views and comments are widely disseminated through online forwarding and chatting. In addition, most opinion leaders are not anonymously online but use their full name. Therefore, their opinions are believed to be more reliable than those of anonymous online users. Finally,

142 Ye Chunli: Yijian lingxiu zai nongcun zhili zhong de jiji zuoyong – yi hongtaqu weili (On the positive role of opinion leaders on village governance – a case of Hongta district). In: *Xiandai Jiaoji* (Modern Communication), October 2016, 34–35.

143 Zhang Houyuan: Hulianwang+’zhanlüe dui nongcun wangluo yuqing tichu de tiaozhan yu duice (The challenges and measures posed by the “Internet+” strategy on village online public opinion). In: *Zhongguo Guangbo* (China Broadcasting), Issue 7, 2015, 22–26.

144 Ye Chunli 2016, 34.

145 Zhu Yang and Zhang Ruli: ‘Wangluo yijian lingxiu’ yu ‘wangluo yijian lingxiutie’ de gainian ji neihan fenxi (An analysis of the concepts of ‘online opinion leader as a person’ and ‘online opinion leaders as a post’). In: *Qingbao Zazhi* (Journal of Intelligence), Vol.35, No. 6, 2016, 70–74.

146 Similarly: Fan Xiaotian: Wangluo yijian daibiao renshi tongzhan gongzuo jizhi yanjiu (The mechanism of United Front work with regard to online opinion leaders). In: *Hunan Sheng Shehuizhuyi Xueyuan Xuebao* (Journal of Hunan Socialist College), 17.5.2016, 42–44.

147 Street 2004, 437.

148 Most existing research on this issue focuses on the examination of the (political) influence of celebrities through Weibo/blogging. Many Chinese articles are available on this topic, e.g. Liang Zengli: *Dangdai Zhongguo mingren weibo zhengzhi canyu yanjiu* (Political participation and research on China’s current famous bloggers). Master’s thesis at Hebei University, 2014, <http://cdmd.cnki.com.cn/Article/CDMD-10075-1014039198.htm> (accessed 1 September 2016); Cheng Jialin: Wangluo canyu daibiaoxing geren huo renqun qianxi (Individual participative representation on the internet and crowd analysis). Available at: <http://www.cnki.com.cn/Article/CJFD-Total-CAIZ201225123.htm> (accessed 1 September 2016).

149 In 2013, for instance, the top six opinion leaders on Sina Weibo, also called “big V”, such as Yao Chen and Chen Kun, had more than 50 million followers; see Xiong Jingzhou: Dui wangluo yijian daibiao renshi tongzhan gongzuode sikao (The United Front work of online opinion leaders). In: *Chongqing Shehuizhuyi Xueyuan Xuebao* (Journal of Chongqing Socialist College), 1, 2014, 38–40.

they actively participate in posting comments on current and trending social topics.<sup>150</sup>

However, OLs should be understood not merely as the most popular (most followed), but also as the most opinionated, trusted (by the audience), influential and representative users in the cyberspace. In addition, OLs are very capable persons, although their capacities may vary. Here, Ran Hua compares OLs to political elites and suggests that OLs produce an effect of ‘capable man’ (*nengren xiaoying*). Firstly, like *Nengren* (capable people), OLs possess very strong social skills and personal charm, which enable them to attract certain social groups despite their seemingly dominating character. Secondly, OLs and *Nengren* alike concentrate certain social capital by means of which they directly influence and guide the distribution of power in the public sphere. Thirdly, both perform a role of redistributors of centralized power and intensively promote a more equal and balanced system or rules.<sup>151</sup> Ran Hua continues by exemplifying how popular online opinion leaders such as media producer, singer and writer Gao Xiaosong, history teacher Yuan Tengfei and media commentator and host Liang Hongda have all transformed from virtual *Nengren* into influential *Nengren* in the offline environment. This suggests that the boundary between OLs and *Nengren* is actually insignificant.

## 6.2 OLs AS INFLUENCERS AND E-REPRESENTATIVES

In the Chinese sources, the OLs are mostly seen as influencers and their role is most often discussed in connection to the issues of *huayuquan* and *yulun*. And to understand why OLs matter, we should first look more closely at how *huayuquan* and *yulun* in the cyberspace are understood in China. According to David Murphy, *huayuquan* is “the right to speak and be heard, or to speak with authority”; it can also be understood as “the power to lead and guide debate, or set the parameters of acceptable discourse”.<sup>152</sup> *Huayuquan* derives from authority and is earned by persuasion; it is vested in the one who is highly respected.<sup>153</sup> Previously, the issue of *huayuquan* was hotly discussed in relation to China’s international status. It was claimed that China lacked the right to speak and be heard on global issues and thus had to reclaim its *huayuquan* in international affairs. However, recently, internet *huayuquan* has been widely discussed as a domestic issue. It is believed that with the advance of cyber communication, and Weibo microblogging in particular, a *huayuquan* revolution has been unfolding in China.<sup>154</sup> That mainly implies that the party-state no longer holds the monopoly over public debate (*yulun*) and now has to compete with other actors in the online environment.

*Yulun*, according to Liu Jianming, professor at Qinghua University and one of the most prominent Chinese researchers of *yulun*, is composed

150 Wang Canfa and Li Tingting: Quntixing shijian zhong weibo yulun lingxiu yijian de xingcheng, kuosan moshi ji yindao celue tantao (The formation, diffusion and leading strategy of Weibo opinion leaders in collective events). In: *Xiandai Chuanbo: Zhongguo Chuanmei Daxue Xuebao* (Modern Communication: Journal of the China Communication University), 3, 2013, 148–149; Xiong Jingzhou 2014, 38–40.

151 Ran Hua: Nengren xianxiang, yijian lingxiu, huayu pingquan (The phenomenon of capable man, opinion leader and the equal right to speak). In: *Zhejiang Shuren Daxue Xuebao* (Journal of Zhejiang Shuren University), Vol. 16, No. 5, September 2016, 86–89.

152 David Murphy: *Huayuquan 话语权: Speak and be Heard*. Sidney et al. (Australian National University Press), 2014.

153 Fan Xin and Nie Zhi: Zimeiti lüchong xia woguo zhuliu yishi xingtai de huayuquan kongzhi yanjiu (A study on the control of the discourse right of China’s mainstream ideology from the ‘Me-media’ perspective). In: *Xueshu Luntan* (Academic Forum), Issue 7, 2015, 139–142.

154 Yuan Furong: Lingdao ganbu ruhe bawo hulianwang shidai huayuquan (How should leading cadres grasp the power to speak in the age of internet). In: *Lingdao Kexue* (Leadership Science), January 2015, 24–26.

of a collection of opinions. In essence, it is “collective consciousness and common opinions”.<sup>155</sup> Liu further differentiates between *yulun* and propaganda. In contrast to propaganda, *yulun* is spontaneous, even blind, and its development is mainly determined by the action of public discussion and collective opinions and not by a single person or interest group.<sup>156</sup> In this sense *yulun* is passive, while propaganda is structured and active.

Furthermore, the balanced *yulun* ecology (*yulun shengtai*) depends on the harmonious co-existence of diverse voices.<sup>157</sup> However, now it seems that the *yulun* ecology has split into two sub-ecologies represented by official websites on the one side and Weibo on the other.<sup>158</sup> The interdynamic between the two is neither explicitly opposing, nor is it interconnected. It is best described as a complex game between different groups that represent different interests.<sup>159</sup> By providing alternative opinions and discourses, OLs actively shape the ecology of public discus-

sion. It is often suggested that at present OLs possess a stronger *huayuquan* and that this unbalances the ecology of online public discussion. That explains why sometimes OLs are called *yulun* leaders.<sup>160</sup>

In China, the discussion regarding the impact of OLs on *yulun* mainly consists of two dominant themes: (1) the role of OLs during times of emergencies and (2) OLs’ long term impact on party ideology. For example, Lu Heqiu and Yang Zeya discuss different topics employed by the OLs in order to mobilize debate in the wake of emergencies, such as (1) problem defining; (2) explanation of cause and effect; (3) possible solutions; and (4) emotional expression.<sup>161</sup> Ru Xuhua provides a broader perspective and explains the growing *huayuquan* power of OLs in terms of the inefficiency of the government during national emergencies.<sup>162</sup> Regarding the party ideology, there is a general concern that the internet is eroding the leading *huayuquan* of the party and the core socialist values.<sup>163</sup> The *huayuquan* pow-

155 Liu Jianmin: *Shehui yulun yuanli* (The Principles of Public Opinion). Beijing (Huaxia Publishing House) 2002, 2. Quoted in Ye Jun and Dai Chao: *Yulun: minyi de qingyubiao – du Liu Jianming ‘Shehui yulun yuanli’* (Public opinion: the barometer of public will – reading Liu Jianmin’s “The principles of public opinion”). In: *Dongnan Chuanbo* (Southeast Communication), Issue 3, 2011, 41–42.

156 Liu Jianming 2002, 15.

157 Liu Jianming: *Yulun chuanbo* (Public Opinion and Communication). Beijing Qinghua University Press) 2001, 92–119. op. cit. in: Yin Jun and Li Yueqi: *Wangluo yulun shengtai shiheng jiaozheng tujing tanxi* (On how to improve the imbalance in online public opinion ecology). In: *Xinwen Yu Xiezuo* (News and Writing), September 2015, 58.

158 Gao Zhongjian and Hu Yujing: *Wangluo yulun shengtai shiheng biaoqian ji qi jiaozheng* (On imbalance and improvement of online public opinion ecology). In: *Renmin Luntan* (People’s Tribune), Issue 441, 2014, 39–41.

159 Yin Jun and Li Yueqi: *Wangluo yulun shengtai shiheng jiaozheng tujing tanxi* (On how to improve the imbalance in online public opinion ecology). In: *Xinwen Yu Xiezuo* (News and Writing), September 2015, 58–60.

160 For example, see Luo Xu: *Wangluo zhengzhi canyu zhong de yulun lingxiu yanjiu: yanjin yu guizhi* (An analysis of opinion leaders in online political participation: evolution and regulation). In: *Tansuo* (Discovery), Issue 4, 2012, 188–192.

161 Lu Heqiu and Yang Zeya: *Gonggong shijian zhong weibo yijian lingxiu de huayu celue yu wenben kuangjia – jiyu xinlang weibo de shizheng yanjiu* (Discourse strategies and content framing used by Weibo opinion leaders during mass public incidents – an empirical analysis of Sina Weibo). In: *Hubei Daxue Xuebao* (Journal of Hubei University), Vol. 40, No. 5, 2013, 142–147.

162 Ru Xuhua: *Weibo yijian lingxiu changyu xia tufa gonggong shijian zhili de zhengfu shilling yanjiu* (An analysis of government failure to use Weibo platforms during public emergency incidents). In: *Hunan Daxue Xuebao* (Journal of Henan University), Vol. 53, No. 5, 2013, 92–98.

163 Liu Ning and Wang Hong: *Xinmeiti shiyu xia shehui zhuyi hexi jiazhi chuanbo huayuquan goujian* (Construction of discourse power for promoting core socialist values in the age of new media). In: *Lanzhou Jiaoyu Xueyuan Xuebao* (Journal of Lanzhou Institute of Education), January 2017, 51–52.

er of OLs is also crucial for successful promotion and popularization of Marxism among netizens.<sup>164</sup>

The OLs are not always presented in this positive light and are often criticized in the Chinese sources. Song Chunyan probably best summarized the most frequently heard criticism in four points: (1) media OLs lack social responsibility and mostly pursue economic profit; (2) experts OLs blindly follow the “masses” and lack critical argumentation; (3) government OLs do not actively interact with the public. Song concludes that generally speaking some of OLs are in crisis since the trust between them and the public has been shaken.<sup>165</sup>

Furthermore, the OLs should be understood not only as influencers, but also as e-representatives. More precisely, OLs can exert so much influence on the public precisely because they possess strong representative power. In other words, they are influential because they representative. OLs have broad access to reliable information, possess a strong ability to communicate online and enjoy a high level of prestige and acknowledgement among netizens.<sup>166</sup> One of the keys to their online success lies in the authenticity and repre-

sentativeness of their stories, an indispensable component of truly meaningful communication and a fundamental pillar of representation. They differ from ordinary bloggers through the scope of their online activities, their social prestige, personal involvement and public recognition.<sup>167</sup> Employing Shikai Hu’s deconstruction of representation into three factors: sense of representation, willingness to represent, and capacity to represent,<sup>168</sup> we argue that all of them apply to the opinion leaders; for example, OLs are not only willing to act as representatives but also possess a strong capacity to do so.

With regard to representation, two factors are crucial here: (a) a general crisis of traditional patterns of representation in China, and (b) the emergence of new patterns of political communication through advanced technologies. OLs with a high level of fandom represent the opinions of specific groups within society. They are not elected or selected but still are representatives who stand for (represent) distinct ideas among the population, primarily the younger ones who became regular followers of the blogs. They have a major impact on these followers, shaping their attitudes, values and behaviors. Concurrently they represent their sentiments and ideas, a major reason why Chinese officials, as we have already discussed, frequently suggest that these opinion leaders with a “high level of influence” be involved in the work of the “United Front Departments of the CCP” (*tongzhanbu*). In this way, they could be guided (*yindao*), educated and harnessed in the interests of the CCP.<sup>169</sup>

164 Su Tong and Nie Jiahua: Chuanboxue shijiao xia make-si zhuyi dazhonghua lujing yanjiu zongshu (A summary of the research on the popularization of Marxism from the communication study perspective). In: *Zhong-gong Shanxisheng Dangxiao Xuebao* (Journal of Shanxi Provincial Committee Party School of CPC), Vol. 40, No. 2, 2017, 8–13.

165 Song Chunyan: Wangluo yijian lingxiu gongxinli de pipan yu chongjian (Criticism and re-building of public trust in online opinion leaders). In: *Hunan Shifan Daxue Shehui Kexue Xuebao* (Journal of Hunan University Social Sciences), Issue 4, 2016, 5–9.

166 Luo Xu: Wangluo zhengzhi canyu zhong de yulun lingxiu yanjiu (Study of opinion leaders in online political participation: evolution and regulation). In: *Tansuo* (Discovery), 4, 2012, 188–192. A study conducted by Xue Ke and Chen Xi revealed this; see “BBS zhong de ‘yulun lingxiu’ yingxiangli chuanbo moying yanjiu” (The influence diffusion model of “opinion leaders” in BBS). *Xinwei Daxue* (Xinwen University), 4, 2010, 87–93.

167 Luo Xu 2012, 188–192.

168 Shikai Hu: Representation without democratization: The “Signature Incident” and China’s National People’s Congress. In: *The Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1993, 3–34.

169 Fan Xiaotian 2016, 42–44; Ji Qiang: Wangluo “yijian lingxiu” tongzhan gongzuo tanxi (Tracing the United Front work of Internet “opinion leaders”). In: *Tongzhan lilun Yu shijian* (Theory and Practice of United Front Work), 4, 2014, 23–28.



### 6.3 OLs AND THE AUDIENCE

The relationship between the OLs and their audiences is of a peculiar kind. It is thus interesting to see how OLs themselves see their role and influence. Fan Wei, a blogger with over one million followers<sup>170</sup>, for instance, says that in reality OLs do not exert immense political leverage:

There are some on Weibo who speak for the people. This allows many users to use unlimited and outreaching possibilities of the Weibo to solve their own practical problems; for example, they may ask for help in times of difficulties or forced demolition. However, the right to speak (*huayuquan*) on Weibo does not have any real meaning. It cannot change international affairs or politics or economy; it can only solve some small-scale practical problems.<sup>171</sup>

The writer and blogger Lu Guoping, whose blog is followed by almost half a million users,<sup>172</sup> points out that the real power is in the hands of the audience and not individual bloggers:

Essentially Weibo is a platform where anyone can speak, anyone has a microphone. But *huayuquan* is only relative, because even if one has the right to speak (*fayanquan*), but does not have many followers and high rate of posts, that means he does not really have *huayuquan*. Therefore the foundation and capital of celebrities' and opinion leaders' *huayuquan* derive from the popularity that they have been grad-

ually accumulating day by day and month by month. But this *huayuquan* is by no means monopolistic, because the audience can easily express their opposing opinions and if necessary create a new opinion leader through whom they can fundamental and strategic work post exceeds the role of an individual; with the creation of new discourses through the opinion-leading posts, a new form of mass mobilization evolves, with much more formidable power to unite intellectual elites and the "masses".<sup>173</sup>

Furthermore, this view of the audience as the key player contrasts with the "spiral of silence" theory frequently mentioned in the Chinese sources. This theory was formulated by the German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in her article "The spiral of silence. A theory of public opinion" (1974) and later in her book "The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion – Our Social Skin" (1993).<sup>174</sup> Briefly, the theory points to people's unwillingness to speak out if their opinions are in contradiction to the main public opinion climate. However, from empirical observations of the Chinese cyberspace, we see that the audience is not silent at all but extremely proactive. It has the power over individual OLs and discourses; and individual members of the audience can themselves produce a leading opinion post and become an OL. This is not a silent audience; on the contrary, it is rigidly proactive and thunderous.

### 6.4 THE REACTION OF THE PARTY-STATE

The developments described above leave no room for doubt that the party-state is increasingly concerned with the issues of *yulun*, *huayuquan* and OLs in particular. Therefore, in addition to

170 Fan Wei's blog can be found at: [https://www.weibo.com/fanweidejia?c=spr\\_qdzh\\_bd\\_baidusmt\\_weibo\\_s&nick=%E8%8C%83%E7%82%9C&is\\_hot=1](https://www.weibo.com/fanweidejia?c=spr_qdzh_bd_baidusmt_weibo_s&nick=%E8%8C%83%E7%82%9C&is_hot=1) (accessed 31 August 2017).

171 Fan Wei in "Weibo huayu 'baquan' de ji ge zhuiwen" (Several questions on Weibo discourse hegemony), Renmin luntan wenjuan diaocha zhongxin (People's Tribune Survey Centre), April 2013.

172 Lu Guoping's Weibo blog is available at: [https://www.weibo.com/xzp9hmvvmvhsckf8q?c=spr\\_qdzh\\_bd\\_baidusmt\\_weibo\\_s&nick=%E9%B2%81%E5%9B%BD%E5%B9%B3%E5%85%88%E7%94%9F&is\\_all=1](https://www.weibo.com/xzp9hmvvmvhsckf8q?c=spr_qdzh_bd_baidusmt_weibo_s&nick=%E9%B2%81%E5%9B%BD%E5%B9%B3%E5%85%88%E7%94%9F&is_all=1) (accessed 31 August 2017).

173 Zhu and Zhang 2016, 73.

174 Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann: The Spiral of Silence. A Theory of Public Opinion. In: *Journal of Communication*, 24 (2), 1974, 43–51. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann: *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion – Our Social Skin*. Chicago (Chicago University Press) 1993.

the debate on the role of OLs, another prominent subject of interest is the question of how the party-state should deal with the OLs. In 2015, Xi Jinping made a speech on enhancing work with leading non-party personages (*dangwai daibiao renshi*). This speech was classified as a top-level design and as a fundamental and strategic work of the United Front.<sup>175</sup> Xi's speech inspired a vivid debate about the future of online OLs. Two key approaches were put forward in the debate: (1) the party-state should guide and cultivate OLs; and (2) the party-state should cooperate with OLs.

According to the first approach, the government should tighten the management of the internet and OLs through the introduction of new regulations and laws. By means of new regulations, the government should supervise and guide (*yindao*) the OLs and lead the online *yulun* in general.<sup>176</sup> The government can also cultivate its own OLs. It seems that the latter view has gained enormous popularity. For example, Xu Li suggests creating new OLs that are patriotic and responsible. Xu believes that some leading cadres and party members could become online OLs.<sup>177</sup> Zhao Li advises police departments to cultivate police opinion leaders that will promote a positive image of the police on the internet.<sup>178</sup> Yang Weilei, Xia Deji and Yang Limei talk about new OLs in

the People's Liberation Army who will represent "the core values of contemporary revolutionary soldiers".<sup>179</sup> Dong Menghang even claims that it is crucial to cultivate China's "own OLs" to influence dynamics on the international stage.<sup>180</sup>

Supporters of another view hold that the party-state should enhance cooperation with the OLs. For example, Ying Haiting speaks of an equal dialog between the government and OLs as the foundation of cooperation.<sup>181</sup> Lei Yuejie and Li Zhi, who are professors at the Communication University of China, stress that the popularity of OLs derives from their representativeness of grassroots. In other words, OLs enjoy a high level of public respect and trust. This is their advantage and strength. Therefore, the government can use these OLs as channels for negotiating with the people. OLs can also assist in promoting mass political participation. The OLs come from and represent the masses; therefore it is only in cooperation with them that the government can create a positive ecology in the cyberspace that would also increase the government's governing capacity and efficiency in the offline environment.<sup>182</sup> As can be seen, this approach is less coercive and emphasizes mutual respect and cooperation.

175 <http://news.sohu.com/20150521/n413444361.shtml> (accessed 1 September 2017).

176 For example see Jiang Shenghong: Weibo yijian lingxiu de xin tezhen, cunzai de wenti yu duice sikao (New features of the Weibo opinion leaders: problems and solutions). In: *Lilun Yu Xiandaihua* (Theory and Modernization), March 2014, 74–79.

177 Xu Li: Xiesheng minzhu zhidu xia 'yijianlingxiu' de juese yu zuoyong yindao (Guidance of the role and functions of the opinion leaders under the system of deliberative democracy). In: *Jinggangshan Daxue Xuebao* (Journal of Jinggangshan University), Vol. 37, No. 4, 2016, 70.

178 Zhao Li: Lun gong'an wangluo yijian de peiyang (On cultivation of police opinion leaders). In: *Fazhi Bolan* (Legality Vision), September 2015, 39–40.

179 Yang Weilei, Xia Deji and Yang Limei: Peiyang wujun wangluo yijian lingxiu de lujing yanjiu (On how to cultivate army opinion leaders in China). In: *Sudu Xunkan* (Speed Reading), November 2015, 76.

180 Dong Menghang: Wangluo huanjing xia "yijian lingxiu" zai guoji yulun yindao zhong zhi yunyong (The use and guidance of online opinion leaders in international public discussions). In: *Dongnan Chuanbo* (Southeast Communication), Issue 7, 2010, 13–15.

181 Yin Haiting: Lun wangluo quntixing shijian zhong zhengfu yu yijian lingxiu de hudong jizhi (On the role of government and opinion leaders and their interactions during online mass incidents). In: *Gonggong Zhili* (Public Administration), September 2013, 65–67.

182 Lei Yuejie and Li Zhi: Fahui hao wangluo yijian lingxiu de shehui zhengzhi zuoyong (On unleashing the social and political role of online opinion leaders). In: *Renmin Luntan* (People's Tribune), May 2016, 64–65.

## 7 PRIVATE ENTREPRENEURS AND E-REPRESENTATION

Our fieldwork among Chinese entrepreneurs<sup>183</sup> shows that the new social media offer a venue for personalized communication and information which can help to solve all sorts of individual business problems without state interference and where interests can be articulated without such interference. Interviewees told us that the members of each branch organization of their entrepreneurial association are interconnected by Weixin (WeChat) as a chat group, so that they can quickly receive or exchange news, including information of relevance to their businesses, including on new policies and regulations. This is seen not only as a business relationship but also as part of their network identity building.<sup>184</sup>

In the same manner, smartphones do not only act as personal digital assistants but also constitute selfhood, group solidarity, a sense of belonging or exclusion and extended networking.<sup>185</sup> Many participants conceive of this interaction as part of the self-representation of their community. By self-representation, they mean not only self-portrayal through personal websites, or the interactive process among peers and individual

networks.<sup>186</sup> What is meant is that they need to take their fate in their own hands and to solve problems via their own chat groups and networks and not through distant representatives or representatives of the party-state. Accordingly, the internet has developed into a strong instrument of autonomous expression beyond the political system,<sup>187</sup> although the party-state attempts by every means to bring the internet under its control.

Internet activities by private entrepreneurs are by no means directed towards changing the political system but are mainly concerned with sharing information about personal and business grievances, entrepreneurial lifestyles, problem-solving, exchange of individual views, and strategy development for the promotion of individual company interests. Concurrently, chat rooms provide a community or group with a new, higher and more visible profile. By bundling grievances and helping to solve problems collectively, these chat rooms engender a specific kind of collective action which we have classified above as 'connective action'. It does not aim to challenge or change the political system but helps to ensure stable and smooth development of the private sector. One entrepreneur we interviewed in Beijing responded to the question whether entrepreneurs are going to change China by remarking that such networks would not change the system itself but rather the entrepreneurs' perception of it, and that technology

183 Fieldwork on representation of private entrepreneurs was conducted in February–April 2016 in Beijing, Shandong, Zhejiang, Guangdong and Hainan, and in February–April 2017 in Beijing, Shandong, Zhejiang, Guangdong, and Yunnan. We primarily interviewed private entrepreneurs, chambers of industry and commerce, and entrepreneurial associations in in-depth interviews lasting 1½ to 2 hours and focusing on issues related to formal and informal (political) representation.

184 Interview, Zhejiang Provincial Association of Regional Economic Promotion (Zhejiang sheng quyu jingji cujinhui), an entrepreneurial association founded by graduates of Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, 22 March 2017.

185 See e.g. Cara Wallis: *Technomobility in China. Young migrant women and mobile phones*. New York and London (New York University Press) 2013, 5–6.

186 Interviews: Beijing, 2 March 2017; Kunming, 9 March 2017; Hangzhou, 22 March 2017; Qingdao, 26 and 28 March 2017.

187 Araba Say and Manuel Castells: From Media Politics to Networked Politics: The Internet and the Political Process. In: M. Castells (ed.): *The Network Society. A Cross Cultural Perspective*. Available at: [http://econpapers.repec.org/bookchap/elgeechap/3203\\_5f16.htm](http://econpapers.repec.org/bookchap/elgeechap/3203_5f16.htm) (accessed 28 July 2017). Eugenia Siapera called this "connected autonomy", see: The political subject of blog. In: *Information Polity* 13, 2008, 59.

would promote communication between people. Moreover, through the internet they could find the things they want to. And:

Weixin changes the perception of the Chinese people ... Up to 98 % of the Chinese government and enterprises have the same objectives; they differ only in 2 % ... Thus the conflicts between the government and entrepreneurs are small ... In the end, the internet contributes to the survival of the system since the government provides us with assistance and support.<sup>188</sup>

The same entrepreneur told us that he had established his own internet platforms which now host as many as 800 chat groups (including digital chambers of commerce) with fixed membership and operating independently of government organizations. He himself regularly and actively participates in just only four of these chat groups, which, he told us, have their own member-elected boards and codes of conduct. The discussions among chat group members primarily focus on business-related problems, such as finding loans, building relationships with politicians, consulting experts and business leaders, and seeking general business advice.<sup>189</sup> Another respondent pointed out that younger entrepreneurs above all are increasingly selling their products via the internet and therefore have little interest in developing *guanxi* to local governments:

By means of the internet, we can regulate more issues among ourselves at a distance from the government. Our online networks also promote mutual support and collaboration in terms of investment, marketing, enterprise mergers, business advice and credits. By means of the internet we like to take things in our own hands and to represent ourselves.<sup>190</sup>

188 Interview, Beijing, 7 September 2015.

189 Interview, Beijing, 7 September 2015.

190 Interview, Qingdao, 2 March 2016.

'Connective action' is therefore also a strategy for gaining more independence from the government and for self-representation. Another interviewee, a graduate of the Changjiang Business School in Shanghai, remarked in referring to his classmate group of 52 people:

There is a strong we-group feeling and distinct trust existing among us. Through WeChat, we are communicating with each other about everything important almost on a daily basis: our grievances, life, hobbies, entrepreneurial and enterprise problems and how to solve these problems. It is a kind of an internal IT and advisory club. We grant each other loans, even without interest, invest in classmates' companies and collaborate wherever possible. If a member of the network is looking for a prominent entrepreneur or a leading figure of a bank, he or she will first of all approach the members of its personal MBA network. If this fails, we ask the professors of the school to establish such contacts via the school's large-scale network. Therefore, these schools are not only training organizations but rather life-long network platforms of cooperation, not only in reality but also virtually.<sup>191</sup>

Entrepreneurs also organize collective action campaigns via WeChat. For example, a campaign by entrepreneurs in Zhejiang in 2012 was initially organized via a chat message provider.<sup>192</sup>

191 Interview, Beijing, 18 February 2015.

192 One entrepreneur in Hangzhou told us that signatures of 600 renowned entrepreneurs were collected in this city in 2012 and sent to both the provincial government and Zhejiang's Bureau of Finance in a demand for stronger support in gaining access to credit facilities. The entrepreneurs had two principal demands: (a) the government should establish a special task force to find solutions to the credit issue, and (b) the government should urge banks to repeal their decision not to give further loans to private enterprises. The background situation was that private individuals were offering short-term loans at exorbitant interest rates (up to 80 %). The banks, for their part, demanded that each credit be repaid entirely after its expiration (as a rule after one year), while the collateral remained with the

A Chinese report on the internet activities of private entrepreneurs found, however, that there are major differences among them in terms of age and level of education. About 62 percent of

the entrepreneurs surveyed frequently or sometimes use Weixin or WeChat to communicate with their networks, but just one third actively participate in blogging activities.<sup>193</sup>

## 8 TOWARD CONCEPTS OF INTERACTIVE AND CONNECTIVE E-REPRESENTATION

As we have discussed, online technologies function “as connectivity-enhancing tools and have prompted the search for novel or inherently formed different new communities (“collective formations”) and actors on the web”.<sup>194</sup> The internet has thus created a new type of communication platform and “assembly room”.<sup>195</sup> We also argued that within these platforms, novel forms of representation are being created. In the Chinese context in particular, where the state closely monitors and rigidly controls the cyberspace, more implicit and tacit forms of self-representation have flourished. We understand representation in the first instance as a process of interactive communication between representatives

and their audiences (or “user communities” in the cyberspace).

Based on our literature review and preliminary field work on opinion leaders and entrepreneurs, we argue that two new patterns of e-representation are evolving in the cyberspace in China. Our preferred terms to describe the two forms are interactive and connective representations. As we shall see below, the two patterns are imbued with some elements of direct representation, discursive representation and self-representation, but also possess constituent characteristics that are distinctive and novel. Our starting point is the view that interaction is at heart of the act of representing. As Saward asserts, to capture the dimensions of new forms of representation, we have to look primarily at the act of representing from the claim-making perspective.<sup>196</sup> We employ this perspective and construct two figures that exemplify how claim-making unfolds in interactive and connective representations. We will comment on each in turn.

### 8.1 INTERACTIVE E-REPRESENTATION

In Figure 1 the cycle begins with a claimant (opinion leader) making a representative claim in the cyberspace that either intends to represent himself (self-representation) or others (self-appointed representation). Then the claim is subjected to intensive scrutiny by the online audiences and/or by those who are represented in the claim. As a result, the claim is either

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banks. This puts enterprises in the situation of needing to find bridging loans which can only be obtained by paying usurious interest rates. As a rule, it is the banks which arrange bridging loans and receive high commissions for doing so. This tremendous burden on private businesses finally resulted in the above-mentioned collective action by Hangzhou’s private entrepreneurs. Interview, Entrepreneur, Hangzhou, 1 March 2015.

193 Lü Peng and Fan Xiaoguang: 2015 nian Zhongguo siying qiye zhu hulianwang xingwei diaocha fenxi baogao (Internet behavior characteristics and preferences among private business owners). In: *2016 nian Zhongguo shehui xingshi fenxi yu yuce* (Analysis and Forecast of China’s Society 2016), eds. Li Peilin, Chen Guangjin and Zhang Yi. Beijing, (Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe (Social Science Academic Press)), 2016, 319–328.

194 Dolata and Schrape 2014, 3.

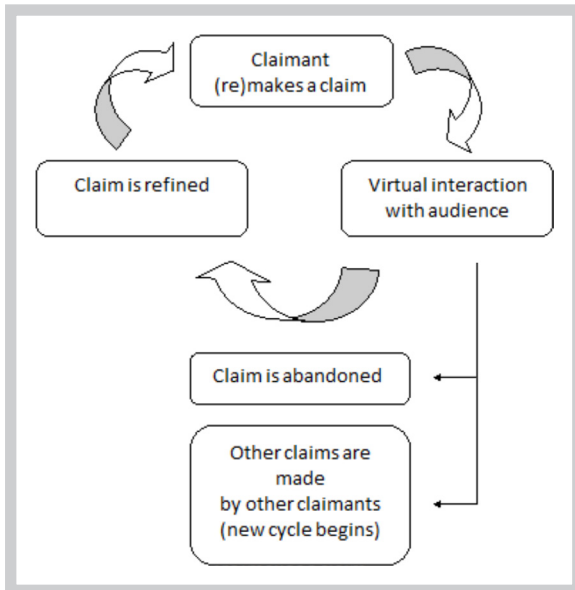
195 Cf. Vincent Mosco and Lewis Kaye: Questioning the Concept of the Audience. In: Ingunn Hagen and Janet Wasko (eds.): *Consuming Audiences? Production and Reception in Media Research*. Cheskill, New Jersey (Hampton Press) 2000, 31–46.

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196 Saward 2006 and 2014.

abandoned due to a lack of approval by the audience, or is refined and readjusted in accordance with the input of the audience. The claimant can then re-make the claim and seek again the audience's approval. Alternatively, other claims can spring from the original claim, initiating a new interactive cycle.

**Figure 1: Interactive Representation and its claim-making cycle**



Three linchpins underlie the concept of interactive e-representation. The first is the way claim-making is conceived of in general. In comparison to Saward's claim-making, which is a performative and constructivist process of constructing claimants and depicting represented constituencies,<sup>197</sup> interactive claim-making is a highly interactive process. It is through the cyclical continuous interaction between the claimant and the audience that a claim is shaped, refined and adjusted. In addition, claim-making is not a single performative act, but an intensified continuous process, during which the claim emerges and is shaped and continuously reshaped. As a result, the claim may grow, stretch and mutate, initiate the emergence of new claims, or is abandoned.

Second, regarding the roles and relations between representatives and represented, in this interactive claim-making process the role of audiences and represented is increasingly active and decisive. It is the audience who decides the ultimate fate of the claim. The process of claim-making is thus no longer hierarchical and representative-led, but flattened and predominantly audience-led. It must be noted, however, that we do not belittle the constitutive role of representatives, and throughout the paper we have repeatedly discussed the role of opinion leaders as mind and discourse shapers. They do perform this function. Moreover, we agree with Saward<sup>198</sup> that in real-life politics, representatives are 'shape-shifting' in the sense that they simultaneously perform multiple roles. However, in interactive claim-making it is ultimately up to the audience which opinion leader to choose, under which circumstances and for what purposes. The role of audience is no longer limited to claim judgment and acceptance but is extended to claim formation. Therefore the type of relation between representatives and represented is no longer one of trustee and delegate, but one where both parties actively contribute to the process, where opinion leaders play a role of a creative 'editor' and the audience actively monitors and makes its input to the creative process.

Third, the claim-making process of interactive e-representation is exceptionally rigid and competitive. There are myriad claimants in the cyberspace and the audience can flexibly select, hold accountable and if necessary denounce their representatives. This intensity pushes representatives to better authenticity, innovative thinking and interactive capacity. Undoubtedly, such interactive e-representation at least challenges and stimulates conventional institutions of mass representation and contains a broad

197 Saward 2006.

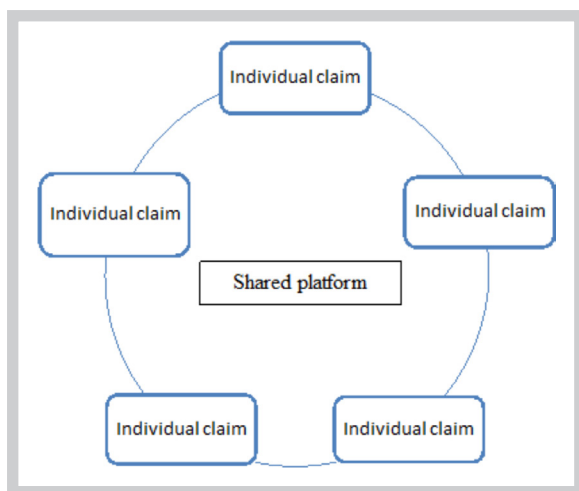
198 Michael Saward: Shape-shifting representation. In: *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 108, No. 4, 2014, 723–736.

range of potentialities for future development. Let's next turn to connective representation.

## 8.2 CONNECTIVE E-REPRESENTATION

Figure 2 exemplifies group dynamics of claim-making in the case of entrepreneurs. Group members share a common platform in the cyberspace and make various individual self-representative claims. With their claims, they often approach state authorities individually. Their claims may differ, but through connectivity, their individual actions produce effects of strong group cohesion and representativeness. All community members are connected through a common platform that is usually Weixin, and claim-making occurs inside as well as outside of the common platform.

**Figure 2: Group claim-making dynamics of Connective Representation**



Mancur Olson has convincingly shown that even if only single members of a group (such as private entrepreneurs) are acting in a way that benefits all members of the group, we can speak of collective behavior.<sup>199</sup> Put differently, even if private entrepreneurs are individually approaching officials online, a 'we-intention' or 'collective in-

tentional behavior' toward achieving collective goals,<sup>200</sup> and thus a kind of representation or a claim of representing the interests of an entire group, can still be assumed. According to our interviews, approaching officials or offices online (or offline) with regard to private sector problems is in many instances not confined to problems of individual enterprises, but is rendered in the name of a larger group of private entrepreneurs, or an entire business sector. These individual entrepreneurs can thus avoid their approach being interpreted as an attempt to make use of individual or personal connections (*guanxi*) or to pursue individual interests.<sup>201</sup> In this way, private entrepreneurs claim to be representatives of a distinct group sharing similar problems. Along the same lines, Greenstein has put forward the point of 'action dispensability' in connection with the question 'whether an individual's actions were necessary for a particular outcome to have taken place', and 'whether it would have occurred if the actions of the individual in question had not occurred'.<sup>202</sup> In sum, if an individual is approaching an official online with a "we intention", this has to be understood as a representative claim.

The process of connective e-representation is non-hierarchical, spontaneous and inclusive. Compared to interactive e-representation, which is often implicit and symbolic, connective e-representation is supposed to solve specific practical problems of a particular community, e.g. entrepreneurs, as we have previously

199 Mancur Olson: *The Logic of Collective Action. Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Cambridge, MA (Harvard University Press) 1971, 22–25.

200 For more on collective intentional behavior see John Searle: Collective intentions and actions. In: Philip R. Cohen, Jerry Morgan and Martha E. Pollack (eds.): *Intentions in Communication*. Cambridge, MA (MIT Press) 1990, 401–415.

201 For example, interviews in Beijing (1 March 2017), Guangzhou (6 March 2017), Kunming (10 March 2017), Hangzhou (22 March 2017) and Qingdao (27 March 2017).

202 Fred I. Greenstein: Can Personality and Politics Be Studied Systematically? In: *Political Psychology*, 13 (1), 1992, 123.

demonstrated. The act of individual self-representation is mostly explicit and pragmatic, but not always strategic and coordinated and often occurs spontaneously. Most importantly, unlike in conventional forms of representation where the roles of represented and representative are clearly marked and fixed, in connective e-representation the boundary is blurred and one person can be both representative and represented.

### 8.3 FROM CONSTRUCTIVIST TO DIGITAL TURN IN THE THEORY OF REPRESENTATION

Interactive and connective forms of e-representation that we propose are certainly in need of further empirical support. Nevertheless, our proposition attempts to uncover the effects of cyber interconnectedness on political representation. In this endeavor, China presents a particularly intriguing case, because compared to democratic countries, cyberspace in China is the only oasis of relatively free and unsuppressed political expression. As a result of lack of free public space in the offline setting, the online environment creates a unique platform for political communication and expression that take many different shapes and forms, which may not necessarily exist in the cyberspaces of democratic countries. Since the internet is the only channel for free political expression and a large number of users have turned to it with the specific purpose of political action, the Chinese cyberspace is intense and concentrated and can thus serve as a magnifying glass for looking at contemporary changes on political representation. Two new forms of representation that we have detected in the Chinese cyberspace contribute to the theory of political representation in two ways.

First, we follow Saward's framework of the representative claim and see claim-making as a critical part of interactive and connective forms of representation. But we view claim-making not so much as a performative act in itself, given that

explicit 'performance' of such a kind in China can be easily considered antagonistic toward the state and party authorities, but as a continuous interactive act. We thus suggest that the process of claim-making as claim-constructing should become the focus of analysis. We believe this approach can better capture shifting dynamics between representatives and the represented and that this in turn would more accurately capture representation in real-life practice in the Chinese case. Secondly, in line with the constructivist turn in the theory of political representation, we argue for a shift in the roles of representatives and audience/represented. This requires some further explanation.

According to Sofia Näsström, the representative turn mainly entails two shifts in the theory of representation. First is a shift from the institutional to the societal realm. Second is recognition of that political representation can be both electoral and non-electoral.<sup>203</sup> In the first shift from institutional to societal paradigm, representation is regarded as "constitutive rather than constitutional".<sup>204</sup> Here, constitutive refers to the process of constituting or making the audience and their interests. For example, Näsström points out that "one of the most important things that representation does is that it creates constituencies".<sup>205</sup> Clarissa Rile Hayward too argues that "representation is something more than making present the interests of the constituency" and that they are rather "made" through representative politics."<sup>206</sup> Lisa Dish looks at representation as a

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203 Sofia Näsström: Where is the representative turn going? In: *European Journal of Political Theory*, 10 (4), 2011, 501–510.

204 Ibid. 506.

205 Ibid. 506.

206 Clarissa Rile Hayward: Making Interest: on representation and democratic legitimacy. In: *Political Representation*, op. cit. in: Sofia Näsström: Where is the representative turn going? In: *European Journal of Political Theory*, 10 (4), 2011, 506.



process of mobilization through which constituencies are subjected to manipulations.<sup>207</sup>

As we see from the literature, the roles between representatives and the represented have been demarcated as those of influencer and influenced, the relationship in which the former constitutes the latter. In addition, other roles of represented marked in the literature are mostly based on Pitkin's principal-agent perspective of democratic representation. In discussion of the power dynamics of the representative claim, researchers outline several roles of the audience, such as acceptance or rejection of the claim, 'reading-back' or contesting the claim<sup>208</sup>; judgment and recognition of the representative;<sup>209</sup> authorization, demand of accountability and claim refining.<sup>210</sup>

Similarly, Stephen Coleman also bases his concept of direct representation on the principal-agent model but goes beyond this perspective in three ways:

First, communication between citizens and representative is conceived of as a two-way process, situated in shared spaces of collaborative interaction. Second, the obligation of representatives to account to, and hear accounts from, citizens becomes central to the act of representing. Third, with the growth of the permanent campaign and anticipatory accountability, representation becomes a more ongoing, deliberative process, rather than an ad hoc aggregation of private preferences.<sup>211</sup>

Interactive and connective e-representations resonate greatly with Coleman's vision in a way that the two forms are also understood as a two-way ongoing collaborative process. However, in interactive and connective claim-making, the power dynamics between representative and represented seem to shift. As a result of the shift, the role of the audience cannot be fully explained by the conventional principal-agent model. In the case of interactive e-representation, representatives and the audience equally act as active constitutors of interests and claims by means of direct interaction. Both influence and constitute each other. In the case of connective e-representation, the roles of representative and the represented can even merge and one person (an individual entrepreneur) can carry out the function of a representative and represented at the same time.

The changing dynamics between representatives and represented reveal a shifting state of political representation. It might be well the case that political representation is taking a new turn, this time a digital turn. The Chinese case vividly demonstrates the effects of digital technologies on political representation and calls for more empirical and theoretical explorations.

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207 Lisa Dish: Toward a Mobilization Conception of Democratic Representation. In: *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 105, No. 1, 2011, 100–114.

208 Saward 2006.

209 Andrew Rehfeld: Towards a General Theory of Political Representation. In: *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 68, No. 1, 2006, 1–21.

210 Laura Montanaro: The Democratic Legitimacy of Self-Appointed Representatives. In: *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 74, No. 4, 2012, 1094–1107.

211 Coleman: *New mediation*, 2005, 196.

## 9 SUMMARY

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With the main focus on political representation in the Chinese cyberspace, this paper provided a literature review and preliminary field observations on the topic. In this paper, the authors have mainly discussed their basic thoughts and ideas on the interrelationship of political representation and new online technologies, which should be further substantiated by empirical evidence.

The paper commenced by conceptualizing political representation in the offline environment, after which a basic conceptualization of e-representation was proposed. It was argued that the concept of e-representation should at least encompass two functional dimensions, such as (i) digitalization of conventional forms of representation and (ii) development of alternative non-

conventional forms of representation. The authors then presented two case studies of opinion leaders and entrepreneurs and suggested that alongside digitalization of conventional forms of formal electoral representation, two new forms of non-conventional informal non-electoral representation have been emerging in the Chinese cyberspace. The two forms were termed interactive and connective e-representation and were further elaborated.

The authors believe that the new forms of interactive and connective e-representation in the Chinese context not only signal a digital turn in political representation in China, but also encourage a thorough reconsideration of representative-represented relationship in the Western theory of representation.



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