

UNDERSTANDING INTERNET-MEDIATED SOCIAL CHANGE IN CHINA:
ANALYZING CATEGORIES OF CITIZENSHIP IN CHINESE PUBLIC DISCOURSE

by

BINGJUAN XIONG

B.A., Henan Polytechnic University, 2008

M.A., Zhejiang University, 2011

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written by Bingjuan Xiong
has been approved for the Department of Communication

Robert T. Craig

Karen Tracy

Date_____

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Abstract

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Understanding Internet-Mediated Social Change in China: Analyzing Categories of
Citizenship in Chinese Public Discourse

Dissertation directed by Professor Emeritus Robert T. Craig

Over the course of two decades, scholars from different disciplines have documented a wide range of Internet-mediated social change in China, from the emergence of new social formations in terms of identity and collective activities to a changing “social contract” between the state and society. Previous scholarly work has shed considerable light on the social and political implications of the Chinese Internet, but little attention has been paid to the meaningfulness of these societal transformations from the point of view of the people who are actually living through them. In other words, the question of how Chinese people themselves make sense of Internet-mediated social change is under-researched, especially with respect to how people in China interpret what it means to be an ordinary Chinese and how they relate to the ruling state in a digital environment. Drawing upon a database consisting of 112 posts in a Chinese BBS forum, video recordings (posted online) of face-to-face interactions and a local TV news program, and approximately 50,000 online comments from two case studies, this dissertation investigates how people in China make sense of and respond to Internet-mediated social transformations in the political realm. Adopting a method of discourse analysis—membership categorization analysis, this investigation foregrounds Chinese speakers’ meaning making practices in constructing memberships of citizenship and negotiating a changing official-

citizen relationship within society. It concludes that speakers strategically invoke six distinctive but overlapping membership categories (namely, *the common folk*, *the people*, *citizen*, *shitizen*, *netizen*, and *the fifty-cent*) as discursive resources to communicate their sense of being (a Chinese citizen), acting (in relation to protesting against corrupt officials and creating socio-political change), relating (to the government and officials), feeling (in response to their marginalization and disenfranchisement in society), and dwelling (in a single party state).

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The use of the Internet in contemporary Chinese society has brought profound political, socio-cultural, and economic transformations in terms of the formation of a new discourse space, new identities (both personal, social, and national), and the changing relationships between the state and its citizens (Herold & Marolt, 2011; Lei, 2011; Link & Xiao, 2013b; Shirk, 2011; Szablewicz, 2014; Yang, 2009). One aspect of these transformations is characterized by the extensive dissemination and normalization of new identity categories from Chinese cyberspace to the whole society. *Netizen* (*wangmin*), *shitizen* (*pimin*), and *loser* (*diaosi*), just to name a few, are emergent membership categories that symbolize new ways of being, acting, relating, feeling, and dwelling (Carbaugh, 2005, 2007)¹ in an increasingly wired China in the 21st century. These categorizations capture, from the Chinese point of view, at least one prominent dimension of what it means to be an ordinary Chinese in this day and age. They provide not only a new membership but also an alternative identity from which millions of Internet users (and people in

¹ Cultural Discourse Analysis (CuDA) claims that people engage in a meta-cultural commentary (about being, relating, feeling, doing, and dwelling) when they communicate (Carbaugh, 2005, 2007). According to this perspective, communication both presumes and constitutes social realities, and as people communicate, they engage in a meta-cultural commentary, that is, “they say things explicitly and implicitly about who they are, how they are related to each other, how they feel, what they are doing, and how they are situated in the nature of things” (Carbaugh, 2007, p.168). Although the current research does not use CuDA as its method of analysis, I borrowed these terms from CuDA to highlight the interconnection between culture and communication and to help me interpret the underlying meta-cultural

general) in China are able to express themselves, participate in political actions, coordinate collective actions, and negotiate a new relationship with the ruling state and government officials. Drawing upon a database consisting of 112 posts in a Chinese BBS forum, video recordings (posted online) of face-to-face interactions and a local TV news program, and approximately 50,000 online comments from two case studies, this dissertation investigates how people in China make sense of and respond to Internet-mediated social transformations in the political realm. Adopting a method of discourse analysis–membership categorization analysis, this investigation foregrounds Chinese speakers’ meaning making practices in constructing memberships of citizenship and negotiating a changing official-citizen relationship within society. It concludes that speakers strategically invoke six distinctive but overlapping membership categories (namely, *the common folk*, *the people*, *citizen*, *shitizen*, *netizen*, and *the fifty-cent*) as discursive resources to communicate their sense of being (a Chinese citizen), acting (in relation to protesting against corrupt officials & creating socio-political change), relating (to the government and officials), feeling (in response to their marginalization and disenfranchisement in society), and dwelling (in a single party state).

In this chapter, the objective is to set the stage for the current investigation by introducing the study of Internet-mediated social change in China and the research questions, followed by a review of existing literature about the study of Chinese Internet. This review will center on scholarly conversations about the impact of the Internet on Chinese society –a key aspect of which addresses social-political changes, and the intersection of media, public discourse, and social change. This chapter concludes with an overview of the structure of this dissertation.

1.1 Introducing Research Questions

Over the course of two decades, scholars from different disciplines have documented a wide range of Internet-mediated societal change in China, from the emergence of new social formations in terms of identity and collective activities (e.g., online activism and popular protests) (Cai, 2010; Liu, 2011; Szablewicz, 2014; Yang, 2009) to a changing “social contract” between the state and society (Herold & Marolt, 2011; Lagerkvist, 2010). Previous scholarly work has shed considerable light on the social and political implications of the Chinese Internet, but little attention has been paid to the meaningfulness of these societal transformations from the point of view of the people who are actually living through them. In other words, the question of how Chinese people themselves make sense of Internet-mediated social change is under-researched, especially with respect to how people in China interpret what it means to be an ordinary Chinese and how they relate to the ruling state in the Internet era. It is with this question the current dissertation project is concerned.

The current scholarship on the Internet-mediated socio-political transformations in China is enormous and multifaceted. It has documented a wide range of ongoing socio-political transformations related to people’s use of the Internet in Chinese society. These transformations pertain to the discursive formation and development of civil society (Brook & Frolic, 1997; Kluver & Powers, 1999; MacKinnon, 2008; Tai, 2006; Volland, 2011), online activism and popular protests (Cai, 2010; Yang, 2009), the emerging online public sphere and political participation (Herold & Marolt, 2011; Zheng & Wu, 2005; Zhou, 2005), the expansion of e-government (Hartford, 2005; Schlaeger & Jiang, 2014), and the (re) constitution of online identities and experiences (Liu, 2011; Szablewicz, 2014). More specifically, when it comes to

the changing relationship between Chinese citizens and the ruling state, scholars have noted that the state has enhanced its ability to manage and channel public opinion so as to maintain its legitimacy and social stability (Jiang, 2010; Sullivan, 2013); and meanwhile Chinese citizens are increasingly taking a more active role in challenging and negotiating the exact boundaries and rules in developing their relationship with the ruling state (Herold, 2011a, 2011b; Lagerkvist, 2010; Richburg, 2009).

These observations raise interesting questions about *communication*, *citizenship*, and *(good) governance* in the Chinese context. On the one hand, a new “discourse space” has emerged through Chinese citizens’ use of the Internet that enables them to transform personhood, society, and politics in a world of carnival, community, and contention (Yang, 2009, p. 217); while, on the other hand, the Chinese government is constantly developing new strategies (e.g., public communication strategies and sophisticated means of censorship) not only to circumscribe dissenting voices (MacKinnon, 2010) but also to encourage “loyal dissent”² (Lagerkvist & Sundqvist, 2013) and active netizens to contribute to the “good governance of China” (e.g., unveiling the corruption of local officials on the Internet) under restricted conditions³ (Herold, 2011a; Sullivan, 2013).

The multifaceted nature of the Chinese Internet, as empirically documented in previous studies (Meng, 2011; Szablewicz, 2014; Yang, 2009, 2012, 2014), challenges a simplistic

² According to Lagerkvist and Sundqvist (2013), loyal dissents toward the Chinese Communist Party refer to Chinese microbloggers who frequently “criticize the party’s policies without directly challenging its leadership or the existing political system at large.” (p. 140)

³ For example, King, Pan, and Roberts (2013), based on their analysis of millions of social media posts from nearly 1,400 social media platforms in China, found that negative posts criticizing the state, its leaders and policies are not more likely to be censored unless they motivate or spur collective social mobilization or activity.

interpretation of the interactions between Chinese citizens, the state, and information and communication technologies (ICTs); and also flags the danger of using dichotomous analytical categories (such as “Controlling State” vs. “Passive Citizens” and “Entertainment” vs. “Politics”⁴) to account for the socio-political impact of the Chinese Internet. In response, scholars have called for more attention to be paid to Chinese people’s use of the Internet in ways that they themselves feel deeply meaningful. Yang (2014), for instance, urged scholars to engage in “deep Internet studies” – an analytical orientation that conceptualizes the Chinese Internet not as a transformative technology on its own but a profound facet of contemporary Chinese society intersecting with other socio-political, cultural, and historical forces in the process of transforming China. This shift in analytical orientation, from technological-determinism to the focus on “meaning” and “people” (and their agency), is a prerequisite for any research aiming to advance our current knowledge of the Chinese Internet in the way as the Chinese are experiencing and living by it.

There are, of course, multiple directions and foci that can be taken to deepen our research on the Chinese Internet. One alternative to this heavy focus on “technology” at the expense of “people” and “meaning” in current scholarship, is to pay more attention to the contentious nature of the Internet as manifested in people’s talk and interactions in this newly emerged “discourse space” that Yang (2009, 2012) described. In other words, we need to focus more on people’s

⁴ Yang (2014) problematizes this conceptual division between “politics” and “entertainment” in understanding Chinese people’s communicative practices in the cyberspace, as a response to the widespread claim that whatever the Chinese are doing in the cyberspace, they shall not be viewed as political because of their absurdity and wildness. In other words, this claim implies that Chinese netizens are more interested in seeking pleasure and entertainment than pursuing political change (MacKinnon, 2010). However, some scholars emphasize the interconnection between entertainment and politics in Chinese society (Herold, 2011a; Yang, 2014), suggesting that Chinese people participate in political actions under a very *apolitical* guise.

meaning-making practices in this discourse space rather than treating the Internet as merely a platform generating the “content” for analysis. These practices offer great insights into unpacking the meaningfulness of the Internet from the perspective of its users as well as of the significance of their online communicative conduct (especially pertaining to the impact of their use of the Internet in fomenting social-political change in China). For instance, Xiong (2015) shows that online contestation and emergent norms regarding “the rights to know” and “information transparency” characterize a changing political culture and public discourse in contemporary China.

This focus on meaning and people also entails particular assumptions (given our research interests in this project) about the Chinese Internet and the role of communication in constituting Internet-mediated social change in contemporary China. The first assumption relates to the “content” of the Chinese Internet in the form of online discourse. Instead of seeing these online texts and talk as merely “content” being analyzed at face value, we need to consider online discourse as part of broader social practices (Fairclough, 1992; Witschge, 2008) that reflect, negotiate, or resist existing power relations and social order in a society. The second assumption concerns the role of communication in mediating socio-cultural and political processes of change. As Craig (2013, p.7) noted, communication theory (i.e. ordinary ideas and ways of talking about communication) “cultivates particular ways of understanding human social existence in terms of communication processes, ways that may challenge traditional cultural understandings and practices.” As such, changing ideas about communication actually contributes to processes of social change, “not only as tools for facilitating change but as essential elements of social change.” Based on these assumptions, it is necessary to examine the communicative resources and changing ideas about communication in Chinese online discourse that reflect and constitute

social change in China's digital environment interlocking with its political, historical, cultural, and technological conditions.

Scholars have noted that the notion of “communication” in the political processes of Asian societies (including China) remains under-researched (Kluver, 2004), especially when it comes to interactions between public and government (Lee & Park, 2014). In view of this knowledge gap, this dissertation project attends to the communicative practices and processes in which Internet-mediated social transformations are made meaningful for people in China who are living through them. To avoid oversimplification of the Chinese context, we adopt a discourse approach in this study by focusing on people's use of membership categories of citizenship in Chinese public discourse (Chapter 2 will explain why these membership categories are chosen as the focal point of analysis). The central concern of this investigation is to provide a situated understanding of social change in China's Internet era in the areas of citizenship and government-people relationship in response to China's interlocking conditions of politics, technology, culture, and history. In view of our intellectual interest, the following research questions will be investigated in this dissertation:

1. How do people make sense in a digital environment of what it means to be Chinese living in contemporary China under a changing social contract between the state and citizens?
2. How do people negotiate government-people relationships under a changing social contract between the state and citizens facilitated by the Internet?

1.2 The Internet and Social-Political Transformations in China

Most scholars of Chinese Internet studies agree that the Internet has transformed how Chinese people disseminate information, organize activities, and interact with their fellows and the government; but they differ in their evaluation of the Chinese Internet—whether the Internet will bring democracy to authoritarian China and to what extent the use of the Internet has induced actual socio-political changes in “offline” China. For example, Damm (2007) argued that “the Chinese Internet is more a playground for leisure, socializing, and commerce than a hotbed of political activism” (p. 290). MacKinnon (2008) expressed similar skepticism about the political impact of the Internet on China, stating that the existence of Internet will not democratize this nation especially considering the government’s censorship of the Internet (as an effective political tool); but he seems to have faith in people’s use of the Internet (especially new media) for promoting long-term political socio-political changes in China:

Powerful socio-political change can be expected to emerge as a result of the millions of online conversations taking place daily on the Chinese Internet: conversations that manage to stay comfortably within the confines of censorship. With each passing day, these conversations do their quiet part to free the collective Chinese mind. (p. 45)

Given this growing strand of literature on Internet and social change in China and various claims being made in this regard, it is necessary to clarify a few larger themes and issues with which this dissertation project will engage in particular. First of all, a number of scholars have claimed that the use of Internet in China has transformed how people communicate horizontally and vertically, despite the central and local governments’ proactive monitoring and control of the Internet (Yang, 2009; Zhou, 2005). Horizontally, different social groups (such as journalists,

public intellectuals, celebrities, young college students and migrant workers) have employed the Internet to connect faster and closer than what they ever could before to share information, build relationships, organize collective events, challenge and create socio-cultural norms, etc.

Vertically, the relationship between ordinary citizens and ruling officials is transformed (and also contested in some cases) *on* and *through* the Internet. This transformation is particularly prominent when we consider the nation-wide promotion of “electronic government,” especially at the municipal level where we see “a major shift in local governments’ assumptions about how citizens can, or should, be treated” (Hartford, 2005, p. 249). The changing relationship between citizens and officeholders in China, especially in the new media environment, is considered a crucial aspect of social change; however, empirical study on this subject is still scarce (an exception being Hartford’s empirical investigation of e-government in two cities, Hangzhou and Nanjing). Another issue in this line of research concerns the analytical move that often frames this changing relationship as a result of the Internet (Harold, 2005; Herold, 2011a). The reason this move is problematic is at least twofold: a) it promotes a technological-deterministic view, without taking note of the changing socio-cultural and political contexts in China, and b) it neglects the interrelations and interactions between people’s online and offline lives. The online vs. offline division is the second theme that I elaborate below.

Secondly, some scholars have spoken against the idea of examining the impact of the Chinese Internet through anchoring online events in the offline world. Herold and Marolt (2011), for example, contend that the “online” and “offline” China are markedly different and separated, and that it is more appropriate to study the Internet (and its potential for fomenting socio-political changes) in its own terms because the Chinese Internet constitutes a space transcendent from the offline world of normality, hierarchies, and stern governmental censorship. There is a

certain degree of necessity to acknowledge the differences with regard to what and how people communicate in the cyberspace and in face-to-face settings, and to take seriously what happens online – not viewing it as a mere reflection of offline society or a “playground” authorized by the government. Nevertheless, it is inadequate to treat online experiences and activities independent from people’s everyday actualities and contexts. Separating people’s online communicative practices from their everyday life actualities only provides a partial and skewed understanding of socio-political changes in contemporary China. As some scholars have pointed out, the interconnection between Chinese people’s online and offline lives is crucial for developing a deeper understanding of the current Chinese society (Cheng, 2009; Liu, 2011). Moreover, the online vs. offline division is artificial and simplistic (Jiang, 2010; Sullivan, 2013) and it imposes a dichotomy between “overlapping and mutually embedded forms of sociality” (Yang, 2012, p. 176) that prevents scholars from fully capturing the interactions and translations between the online and the offline.

Thirdly, the Western pro-democracy narrative surrounding the Internet has been a dominant discourse for explaining and evaluating (and sometimes predicting) social change in China, such as Yuan’s (2010) study on “E-democracy@China.” This narrative has been frequently invoked in intellectual-public discourses both in China and in the West to account for the social-political impacts of the Chinese Internet. Popular Western concepts, such as *democracy*, *(human) rights*, and *public sphere*, are indiscriminatively employed to interpret and assess socio-political changes in China as if they are universally applicable. Scholars have commented on the inadequacy of this pro-democracy narrative and called for a situated study of social change grounded in China’s socio-cultural, political, and historical contexts (Cheng, 2009; Damm, 2007; Herold, 2009; Yang, 2009; Zheng & Wu, 2005). More specifically, Perry (2008)

has argued compellingly that the meaning of “rights” (one of the key concepts in almost every contemporary polity) in Chinese political discourse is significantly different from the Anglo-American tradition. Based on her examination of the conceptions of “rights” as discussed in the discourses of Chinese philosophers, political leaders, and protesters, Perry observed that an enduring concern in China’s “rights talk” from protesters is about collective socioeconomic justice, which is fundamentally different from an Anglo-American focus on individual, civil rights. This observation speaks directly to the problem of applying Western intellectual conceptions (such as “human rights”) to understanding Chinese political discourse without paying attention to the Chinese context in which the discourse is formulated, negotiated and contested.

In response to the three themes discussed above, this dissertation project seeks to empirically capture the complexity and multifacetedness in using the Internet to create social-political change in China by foregrounding the analysis of people’s communicative practices. Instead of imposing dichotomous analytical terms (e.g. democracy vs. authoritarianism, state vs. netizens/citizens) to the Chinese reality, my investigation focuses on Chinese people’s use of membership categories of citizenship (both online and offline) and the implications of their categorizations for understanding the practice of citizenship and government-people relationship in contemporary China. This research aims to contribute to a situated understanding of the specific characteristics of communicative practices in Chinese political life. These practices, although they may sound peculiar or alien to a Western ear, have gained a certain legitimacy and accountability in the Chinese context.

1.3 Public Discourse, Media, and Social Change in China

A discourse approach has been increasingly popular among scholars who are interested in the social, cultural, and/or political implications of talk and texts in Chinese society, although they question the applicability of some specific discourse analytical frameworks (e.g., Shi-xu's critique of critical discourse analysis) in China given its particular socio-cultural, political, and historical realities (Shi-xu, 2005, 2009). Nevertheless, recent research has greatly advanced our knowledge of the socio-political transformations in Chinese society as discussed and debated in the current scholarship. Here I focus on three recently published books that are not only relevant to the object of study in this dissertation project, but also provide a systematic analysis of Chinese public discourse in contemporary China.

Cao, Tian, and Chilton (2014) assembled a series of discourse studies of Chinese politics from a critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective in an edited book *Discourse, Politics and Media in Contemporary China*. The authors in this book conducted a critical reading of texts (and talks) which included government work reports (Qian & Tian, 2014), Chinese leaders' public speeches (Marinelli, 2014) and Chinese journalistic discourse (Tong, 2014), to capture the changing landscape of (elite) political discourse in contemporary China. For example, Cao (2014) engaged in a socio-politically and culturally situated reading of Chinese soft power discourse through his analysis of CCP's official documents, elite academic writings, and media reporting. As he noted, the concept of "soft power" has been re-contextualized in the Chinese elite political discourse drawing upon traditional cultural values such as *he* (i.e., harmony) to re-create a new political identity and outlook for China, nevertheless, the changing landscape of mass media in

Chinese society (especially with the development of media marketization) has increasingly posed challenges for the official “soft power discourse” represented by Chinese political elites.

In another chapter of this book, Tian and Chilton (2014) discussed four issues related to a discourse approach to the study of socio-political transformations in China. Among them, two issues are of particular relevance to the present study: a) a qualitative research method, and b) an emergent public sphere ⁵. They advocated a qualitative research method for doing critical discourse analysis in the Chinese context, noting that a discourse-centered qualitative research inquiry is a valuable and badly needed supplement to a deep understanding of socio-political transformations in China (pp. 204-205). Additionally, an emergent public sphere (or in Yang Guobing’s term, the “new discourse space”) facilitated by Chinese people’s use of the Internet and new media is indispensable for developing a systematic account of socio-political changes in Chinese public discourse.

Kong’s (2014) book, *Popular Media, Social Emotion and Public Discourse in Contemporary China*, adds another interesting dimension to our understanding of recent socio-political changes through her analysis of public discourse derived from a variety of media texts (e.g., television drama, reality TV shows, blockbuster films, and internet-based microfilms) in Chinese popular culture. Within a theoretical focus on the emergent “cultural public sphere,” Kong has argued in compelling ways that public discourse and social communication are

⁵ The other two issues are concerned with a “wider angle” critical perspective and the functionality of discourse (Tian & Chilton, 2014, p. 197-202). It is necessary to clarify that the current study is not interested in making critical and political commitments in its analysis of public discourse, nor taking a functionalist view of discourse in the examination of communication practices and processes through which socio-political transformations take place. In other words, the “functionality of discourse” is not considered the fundamental object of study, rather, it is Chinese citizens’ discursive participation in the emerging public sphere in relation to changing social norms about how to communicate with and talk about the ruling state and government officeholders.

frequently and vigorously launched and debated in emotional terms and that cultural expressions of the personal, the political, and the national are woven together in Chinese public discourse as a way for ordinary Chinese to make sense of the socio-political changes of the past three decades. Kong's observations about Chinese public discourse in an emergent cultural sphere make a strong case for the importance of ordinary Chinese citizens' communicative practices and the meaningfulness of these communicative acts in challenging and changing Chinese politics. Her study draws our attention to the public discourse generated through Chinese citizens' online and offline activities, and to the whole social interactions between the government, media institutions, and Chinese media consumers. It is this insight from Kong's study that inspired me to look at Chinese public discourse and the state's response to these vibrant discussions and debates in China's emergent (online) public sphere as a focus to investigate the changing relationships in Chinese political life.

Lagerkvist (2010), *After the Internet, Before Democracy: Competing Norms in Chinese Media and Society*. In his study of the Chinese citizen-government relationship, Johan Lagerkvist claimed that a new state-society contract is evolving with a precarious equilibrium characterized in the new media environment as two competing social norms that are developed and intensified through Chinese youth's use of the Internet. These two social norms, "controlling Party-State" vs. the "emancipating youth-subaltern," indicate a complex and multifaceted relationship between a state-controlled public and a youth-dominated counter-public. More specifically, Lagerkvist observed that young Chinese Internet bloggers, on the one hand, actively employ the youth-subaltern norm of a counter-public to challenge CCP's legitimate rule, while on the other hand they are constrained by the parental Party-state norm. Moreover, the existence of this youth counter-public, as Lagerkvist argued, will eventually change the Chinese state's view on

information control. The interplay between these two norms exerts great influence on public discourse and public opinions in Chinese society (e.g., what is talked about in public, through what medium and how). Lagerkvist (2010) presented one of the pioneering studies on contemporary Chinese society with a focus on public discourse and social norms. His analysis synthesizes the issues around Chinese political discourse, the use of the Internet, and Chinese culture (both dominant and subaltern cultures) to demonstrate the changing norms and values and their impact on future configuration of China, a single-party state.

As mentioned above, these studies have made considerable contributions to our knowledge about Chinese public discourse in relation to the socio-political transformations and the changing media environment. Nevertheless, there are a few issues that need further exploration. One observation concerns the exclusive focus on the Chinese official discourse (e.g., government annual reports and national leaders' public speeches) in scholars' discourse approach to understanding the socio-political changes in Chinese society. These studies, (as shown in Cao, Tian, & Chilton, 2014) pay little attention to the prevalence of ordinary Chinese citizens' discourse practices in their everyday life, especially in cyberspace. If the analysis of public discourse from political elites is considered a top-down interpretation of socio-political changes (initiated from the state and embraced by Chinese academics), now it is time to take seriously the discourse formations, negotiations, and contestations from ordinary Chinese citizens in order to obtain an accurate understanding of the communication process of the socio-political changes in China. Current scholarship has convincingly shown that Chinese netizens'

online discourse and activities (e.g., Human Flesh Search or RRSS ⁶) contribute to the emergence of a new social contract of state-society and the change of social norms in Chinese society (Herold, 2011b; Largerkvist, 2010). In light of these findings, we need to turn our attention to ordinary Chinese people's sense-making and communicative practices in order to tell a grounded story about Internet-mediated social change from their perspective and experience.

The organization of this dissertation is as follows. In Chapter 2, I will introduce the two case studies (namely, the Zhou Jiugeng Event and the Xiamen Woman case), followed by an explanation of the rationale for choosing these two cases and the data collection on multiple sites. I will then introduce the theoretical and methodological framework (i.e. membership categorization analysis) adopted for the data analysis. Chapter 3 provides a historical review of the notion of citizenship in modern China, as well as the evolution of meanings surrounding six membership categories of citizenship (*the common folk, the people, citizen, shitizen, netizen, the fifty-cent*) – the focal point of analysis in this dissertation. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 present key findings from analyses of the two case studies, focusing on online commenters' (and the Xiamen woman's) membership categorizing practices in communicating their sense of what it means to be Chinese and their normative beliefs about government-people relationship. In conclusion, the final chapter reviews the similarities and differences between the two cases, links the historical

⁶ "Human flesh search" (or 人肉搜索/RRSS), the Chinese expression for searching and digging out personal information in the Internet (such as Google), is a collective means of information sharing for the purpose of tracking down individuals (typically the ones who are exposed online as breaking norms or moral values upheld by majority members of Chinese society) from the virtual world to "offline China." It relies on collective efforts from Chinese netizens to share and contribute information about the target person. According to Herold (2011b), RRSS is a normative online practice for the Chinese to pursue their personal interest (e.g., finding out a run-away wife), to express their mob anger over widespread stories from individuals (e.g., a foreign English teacher's blogs disclosing his sexual conquests of Chinese girls in Shanghai) and to protest against government officials (e.g., the Zhou Jiugeng case in this study and the Lin Jiaxiang incident in 2008).

and the present regarding the historical continuities and discontinuities in the use of these membership categories and the implications for understanding social change. The contribution of this dissertation research to “deep Internet studies” will also be discussed in this chapter, followed by reflections on the limitations of the study and possible avenues for future research.

CHAPTER 2: DATA COLLECTION & METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The main objectives in this chapter are to introduce the two case studies selected for this dissertation; to explain the sites and process of data collection; and to offer a theoretical and methodological framework for data analysis. In what follows, I will first provide a brief chronological development of the two cases, highlighting the role of the Internet in propagating the significance of these two incidents in Chinese society. Next, I will explicate the sites from which data was collected for the two cases studies. After data collection, I will focus on a distinctive type of discourse analysis—membership categorization analysis (MCA) (Sacks, 1992)—and discuss the dividends of applying MCA to the current investigation in terms of linking the micro level analysis of membership categories with social-political change at the macro-level, with a sensitivity to China's cultural, political, and historical contexts. This chapter concludes by forging a theoretical linkage between meta-discourse, communication, and social change in order to highlight the communicative perspective in understanding social change through an analysis of Chinese public discourse.

2.1 Two Case Studies

The two cases selected for this project speak directly to government-people relationships in contemporary China. Unlike other relatively “short-lived” mass events, these two incidents attracted public attention over a long time span and stimulated a huge number of online conversations and comments and also created offline consequences. The unfolding of these two events on the Internet was unique and extraordinary, but it was not just a singular or one-time occurrence. These kind of “interactions” with government officials and law enforcement officers are increasingly common in contemporary China, whether it is like the Zhou Jiugeng case where Internet users started a protest against corrupt officials through so-called human flesh search, or like the Xiamen woman’s case where ordinary civilians attempted to defend their rights by questioning unjust law enforcement on the street. With these kinds of incidents becoming increasingly common and normal, it is intriguing to closely scrutinize these cases in the exploration of Internet-mediated social change in China.

2.1.1 Case #1: The Zhou Jiugeng Event

The “Zhou Jiugeng Event” (or as Chinese netizens wittily described it, “A Bloody Tragedy Triggered by A Package of Cigarette”), was a popular political scandal initiated on the Internet in relation to the Chinese official Zhou Jiugeng. On December 10, 2008, Zhou, the then Director of the Housing Department in the Jiangning District, Nanjing said during a press conference that any real estate developer who sold houses at a price lower than its actual construction cost would be penalized. Once this remark was exposed to the general public, thousands of people were outraged by what this official said and condemned him for

encouraging developers not to lower house prices during the recession of the real estate market in 2008. In response, the second day after this exposure, Chinese netizens started to call for a “human flesh search” (or RRSS-renrou sou suo) about Zhou on the Chinese Internet. Within a few days, Zhou was found consuming expensive cigarettes (about 250-300 US dollars per carton) and wearing luxury watches (such as Vacheron Constantin) on different occasions, as revealed by netizens’ online posts in different BBS forums (such as *Tianya*). With more and more information released on the Internet about Zhou’s luxury life style, it became apparent to netizens that they had caught something more significant than just an ordinary Chinese official who did not know how to please the public in his talk. Zhou was a corrupt official, and many netizens made this allegation on the basis that the kind of luxury life he was leading was not affordable for a municipal level official like Zhou, and they started to press on the local government online to investigate Zhou’s income and his official conduct. Perhaps it was under this public pressure, as well as the continuing unveiling of Zhou’s background (e.g., his brother was actually a real estate developer and his son ran a business of construction materials), that on December 29, 2008, Zhou was removed from office. About two months later, the Nanjing Commission for Discipline Inspection put Zhou's case on file for investigation and prosecution. On August 5, 2009, Nanjing Procuratorate initiated the public prosecution of Zhou for taking bribes, and Zhou was put on trial in the Nanjing Intermediate People's Court in early September. Eventually, on October 10, 2009, Zhou was sentenced to 11 years imprisonment for taking bribes.

The whole story with Zhou Jiugeng was full of contentions. The first debate centered on the question of whether his remark to the media: “real estate developers will be penalized for selling houses at a price lower than the actual construction cost,” was indeed inappropriate. The

second contention surrounded the issue of whether he was just unlucky and ended up in jail for 11 years because of smoking expensive cigarettes and wearing luxury watches (since this kind of life style in the Chinese public discourse is considered normal for government officials). The third debate, especially in cyberspace, was about whether Zhou's conviction signifies Chinese netizens' victory on their journey of revealing and punishing corrupted government officials. All these three issues were hotly debated in the Chinese public discourse.

2.1.2 Case #2: The Xiamen woman Case

This incident is about a Chinese woman in Gulangyu Island, Xiamen (a well known tourist city in Fujian Province, Southeast China) who argued in public with around 20 city inspectors and policemen about whether she had a legal right to put a flower-stand outside her house. Surrounded by groups of tourists, this woman fired questions at those officers, challenging their rightfulness to forbid her flower-stand and then questioning the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party rule in China and raising issues of human rights, while those officers stood in the center of the crowds, not articulating any proper account for what they were doing under those circumstances. After an about 5 minutes of confrontation, those city inspectors and policemen fled the scene ⁷ while the crowds started to applaud and cheer the woman. This whole interaction was recorded by several bystanders using mobile phones, and they quickly

⁷ This is indeed "abnormal" to see government officers leaving a public confrontation without bullying the involved citizen(s), especially in this case with city inspectors (and policemen) who are notorious for cruel and uncivil behaviors such as bullying and blackmailing in the process of law enforcement.

posted it on one of the most popular Chinese entertainment websites *Youku*⁸ on August 31, 2012, with an eye-catching caption “Doughty Woman Eloquently Argue against City Inspectors and Armed Policemen.” This video immediately went viral on the Chinese Internet. Within first three months, it attracted over 5.6 millions views with over 50,000 comments. These online comments present polarized views on the communicative conduct of the woman and the officers. Three days later, the Xiamen TV News invited one of the chief officers who was involved in the event and a female lawyer of the Chinese civil law to comment on the whole event. The chief officer basically told a different story from what was seen in the online video and the lawyer pointed out the possibility of this woman having broken the law. Later on, this news item was posted on the *Youku* site, and as a result, two different versions of the event was circulating on the Chinese Internet and citizens started their ardent debate on various issues in contemporary Chinese society.

2.2 Data Collection

The data that I collected for this research includes video-recorded face-to-face interactions, television broadcasted news program, BBS posts, and online comments. These two case studies are selected as the focus of this research because: 1) they represent different dimensions of understanding citizen-official relationships; 2) they are popular events widely debated and discussed in the Chinese public sphere; and 3) they provide good sites for discursive representations of socio-political change in Chinese society. More specifically, the Xiamen

⁸ This website is functionally equivalent to *youtube* in the US where registered users can upload their own videos, share, and comment on all the videos posted online.

woman's public confrontation with city inspectors and armed policemen can be seen as a direct, face-to-face challenge to the legitimacy of the government rule, while the Zhou Jiugeng incident provides a different channel (i.e. the online platform) through which commenters express their normative beliefs about citizenship and government-people relationships, as their response to officials' expectancy violation (such as Zhou's corruption) in the digital environment⁹. Both cases evoked heated discussions and debates in the Chinese public sphere, circulating from popular online media platforms (such as *Tianya* and *Youku*) to local provincial TV News (i.e., Xiamen TV). The wide range of data collected for this research represents a relatively large database of Chinese public discourse, which is very valuable for an investigation into social change.

There are two sources for its data collection. For the Zhou Jiugeng Event, data was mainly collected from *Tianya*, an online social networking website that has been considered, according to Kong (2014), the most influential Chinese online community around the globe. Founded in 1993, *Tianya* has developed 54 different forums, such as *Tianya* Discussion, Fashion News, Entertainment & Gossip, and Emotional Life. These popular public forums attract over 1.5 million visitors per day and the ongoing vibrant conversations and debates among visitors make *Tianya* distinctive in its ability to represent and mobilize people from different social groups. Moreover, as Kong (2014, p. 129) notes, "the discussions on BBS (*tianya luntan*) tell us more about the public and communicative nature of netizens' cultural activities than personal

⁹ An interesting observation is about the "Offline-Online-Offline" cycle through which these two controversies travel in Chinese society. Both cases were initially noted in offline settings, then with the affordance of ICTs, each quickly escalated into a contentious "mass event" in the Chinese cyberspace. The heated online discussions and debates further stimulated offline reactions to these events.

blogs or individual reviews.” Therefore, its popularity and ability to facilitate public discussions on current social events (and controversies) make *Tianya* a good research site for our investigation of social norms for public discourse in China.

Using “Zhou Jiugeng” (“周久耕” in Chinese) as a keyword, I searched on *Tianya* discussion forum on August 15, 2014 and found 161505 online posts related to the “Zhou Jiugen Event.” I then ranked these posts according to their popularity – a setting on the *Tianya* website that automatically ranks all the posts based on the numbers of comments and views, and chose the most popular 150 posts. After a further reading of these posts, I omitted repeated posts and posts that only contained the search phrase but were not actually about Zhou’s case. As a result of this filtering, 112 posts were included in the database. I then used a commercial web scraper WebHarvy (<https://www.webharvy.com/>) to automatically grab online comments on these posts. Approximately 20,000 comments were collected.

For the Xiamen woman case, data was collected from the original video-recorded conversation (posted on the Chinese website *Youku*) of this woman interacting with government officers and over 50,000 online comments on the original video and the subsequent reposts of this video on the *Youku* site. The video was transcribed based on the commonly used transcription symbols that Karen Tracy (2002) summarizes. The transcription mainly captures words, vocal sounds such as uh, hmm, repetitions and overlaps. Prosodic features of talk (e.g., stress, stretch of sounds, etc.) and timing were not marked in the transcription. All data are in Chinese.

2.3 Method of Analysis

The rationale for adopting membership categorization analysis is based on how “citizenship” in China is conceptualized and studied, oftentimes as a pre-existing category that defines a Chinese reality rather than a “category-in-context” (Hester & Eglin, 1997, p.26) which focuses on “doing” citizenship in particular local circumstances to achieve practical actions and practical reasoning. Previous studies on “citizenship” in China, whether it is a historical analysis of the changing meaning of this term (Goldman & Perry, 2002) or a socio-political analysis of citizen rights in contemporary China (Fong & Murphy, 2006; Goldman, 2005; Guo & Guo, 2015), all share this assumption about Chinese citizenship as a de-contextualized category. In view of this, I propose that MCA offers a promising alternative to explore how Chinese people make sense of what it means to be a “citizen” in China; how they understand their rights and obligations through their participation on the Internet; and what the political and moral implications are when they talk about and position themselves as a certain kind of “citizen” in China.

2.3.1 Membership Categorization Analysis

Derived from Harvey Sacks’s work *Lectures on Conversations* (1992), MCA explores the categorizational aspects of social interactions and texts in order to understand how people make meaning and accomplishing practical tasks of various kinds in and through everyday talk.

Although both MCA and Conversation Analysis (Schegloff, 2007) originated in the work of Sacks, within the literature on language and social interaction, MCA is often distinguished by its focus on the study of categories rather than on the sequential nature of social interactions (Stokoe,

2012). Membership categories, as defined by Sacks, are “classifications or social types that may be used to describe persons” (Hester & Elgin, 1997), and there are general rules that govern the application of these categories in everyday social interaction. For example, the “economy rule” suggests that one need only use a single category when making reference to a person (Milburn, 2009, p. 5), and the “consistent rule” indicates that if a first member of a population is categorized as a member of a specific category (e.g., a sorority girl), then other members of this population can also be categorized in this way by using the same category or other categories of the same collection. What this suggests is that categorization does not need to be about labeling a single member in a single category (Milburn, 2009, p. 5) but can also be applied to a collection of members or constructing collective membership.

Membership categories may be interactionally linked together to form membership categorization devices (e.g., the categories mother, father, daughter can be heard as belong to the same membership categorization device “family”). In addition, some categories are seen as standardized relational pairs (e.g., husband-wife, doctor-patient, police officer-suspect) that seem to go together in everyday talk. The classic example from Sacks’ lecture, “The baby cried. The mommy picked it up.” is made intelligible in that these two categories (child-mommy) are invoked as a relational pair to construct a family relationship between the mommy and the child (i.e. the mommy is the child’s mommy).

One of the central concerns in Sacks’s work was to understand how social world (i.e., social relations and social actions) is made transparent to participants through talk, as Schegloff stated in his introduction to Sacks’s *Lecture on Conversation*:

One of the central tasks which Sacks sets himself in the lectures on “The baby cried” is providing an account of how recognizable activities are done, and done recognizably. And in particular how the activity of ‘describing’ is done, and done recognizably. ... (Quoted from Hester & Eglin, 1997, p. 14)

Membership categories (and categorization) provide one possible analytical focus (among others) to explore how social activities of various kinds are done recognizably, and to “document the locally achieved sense-making where social knowledge (or culture) is employed as, and in doing, social action” (Fitzgerald, 2012, p. 309). One crucial property of categories is that they are inference-rich, which means, categories carry a great deal of social knowledge shared by members of a society (or a cultural group). When a specific category is invoked in social interactions, a set of category-bound activities, predicates, rights and obligations that are associated with this category is brought into the sense-making process of this categorization (Stokoe, 2012, p. 282). These inferences, of course, can be implied in social interactions.

Reynolds and Fitzgerald (2015) discussed three ways in which category features (rights, knowledge, activities, etc.) are deployed. According to their discussion, there are three types of relationship between membership categories and locally invoked associated features. The “category-tied” relationship between category and category features refers to instances when category features are treated by participants as not taken for granted and needing to be made explicit” (p. 99). The second type, “category-bound” relationship is about when “category features are treated by members as naturally related to a category, in a taken for granted, but nevertheless explicit way” (p. 99). The third type, “category-predicate” relationship indicates that a category feature is implied by “the operation of a membership device or category” (p. 100). The different relationships between categories and category features not only suggest some flexible ways in which people do categorization work in their everyday talk, but also provides a

clear orientation for MCA scholars to identify a “moral ordering” whereby behavior and actions, thoughts and opinions are made normatively sanctionable through category-based attribution (Reynolds & Fitzgerald, 2015, p. 100).

Lena Jayyusi (1984) provided one of the first accounts for understanding membership categorization as a normative “moral enterprise.” She noted:

We now find, then, that for some categories X, not only does the displayed lack of certain competences provide grounds for saying that a person is either not an X or not a good X (competences already formulated with respect to a standard of performance), *but further that some categorizations are usable in explicitly moral ways, so that the fulfillment of moral duties and commitments is basic for the assessment of the performance of category tasks* and thus for a person’s being constituted as a *good* X, which is itself central to the notion of being a *genuine* X, e.g., a good mother, a good doctor, a good policemen. (p. 44, italics is original)

This interconnection between membership categorization, moral judgment, and normativity is further developed by MCA scholars. Housley and Fitzgerald (2009, p. 346) argued that MCA provides the method for studying how normative regulation is interactionally accomplished through “specific forms of category configuration that are recognizable resources for members in their attempts to constitute opinion, make evaluations, promote specific world views, assess practices and thereby constitute local configurations of moral organization and sense.” In other words, MCA is not merely about describing or putting a person into a certain category through social interactions, but also about making normative and moral judgments about whether or how this person (as a member of that category) should or should not engage in certain social actions or social relationships. Oftentimes, these judgments produce important social and political implications (as I will demonstrate in my analysis).

Given MCA's close tie with conversation analysis, it is necessary to explicate how MCA is to be applied to my analysis and a few concerns need to be addressed. First, the online data collected for this research, although not strictly following the structure of a natural social interaction (e.g., turn-taking), captures different kinds of interactions. In the Xiamen woman's case, for example, interactions occurred between the Xiamen woman and city inspectors; between the woman and the fellow Chinese who were present during her interaction with those inspectors; between the woman in the online video recording and the people who commented on her in this video; and d) among all the online commenters. Secondly, it is important to point out that in this study, I mainly focus on how Chinese ordinary people talk about and make sense of citizenship and government-people relationships in contemporary China. My data only allows me to make observations about these topics from the point of view of the people who are using these categories, rather than commenting on how these categories are constructed in China's official discourse. Thirdly, as Stokoe (2012) pointed out, scholars may approach an MCA study with a particular category in mind. This is true to the current research. I become interested in people's use of citizenship categories to construct collective identities for themselves and their fellows online, and to negotiate a new relationship with the ruling government. They contest the boundaries of these categories, the rights and obligations associated with each category, as well as the normative conduct of members in these categories and their relational pairs. Their categorizing practices provide rich sites on which normative and moral judgments about acting (or performing) citizenship and relating to the government can be inferred.

2.4 Meta-discourse, Communication, & Social Change

An emphasis on the role of communication in the Chinese political process is crucial for analyzing the dynamics and complexities of Internet-mediated social change in China (Lee & Park, 2014; Yang, 2009). This move entails a theoretical framework that takes *communication* seriously in the Chinese context. More specifically, a communication perspective in this project has three emphases. First, it explores communicative ways of being, acting, feeling, relating, and dwelling in China's digital environment, as well as the implications and consequences of expressive communication. Second, it attends to the cultural resources and strategies utilized by Chinese citizens to construct their membership in different categories, and to normalize, negotiate, and contest their relationship *in* and *through* communication. Last but not least, it focuses on social interactions (particularly meta-discursive expressions) grounded in Chinese people's everyday life as a key to illuminate the image of communication as the site of struggle for competing social norms surrounding citizen-official relationship in contemporary China.

Metadiscourse, according to Craig (2013, p. 13), is "self-reflexive discourse, talk about talk, the pragmatic use of language and other semiotic resources to influence meaning and action by commenting on some aspect of a contextual discourse." This concept can be understood in a narrow sense referring to specific linguistic devices such as reported speech that directly or indirectly re-enacts what was said before to the present context. However, there are other forms of metadiscourse that function in a much broader sense, as Craig (2008, p. 307) observes, they "participate in the ubiquitous social processes through which norms and meanings for communication are continually negotiated." In this broader sense, metadiscourse can be considered an observable indicator of social change (e.g., public contestations of social norms)

especially when it is caught up in complex social controversies and conflicts. As Craig (2013) suggests, in these turbulent social events, metadiscourse is a medium through which competing discourses are articulated, debated, compromised, and/or rejected. In this process, social change occurs as new meanings and norms for communication emerged from public discourse.

Informed by this theoretical framework, I consider social debates and controversies invaluable sites for examining how different notions of or normative beliefs about communicating (as indicated in the meta-discourse) are implicative of social change. Oftentimes, they represent both the “old” and the “new” ways of communicating and behaving that are in tension with each other. In the Chinese context, the new way of *being* (a Chinese citizen) and *relating* (between the government and people) is increasingly re-articulated in Chinese public discourse with an emphasis put on “communication.” This “communication orientation,” as opposed to the old, top-down, and unilateral flow of information, implicates a changing social contract in China (Herold, 2011a). Therefore, when Chinese citizens start “playing” with different membership categories and negotiating a new relationship with the government through their own discourse practices, the impetus for social change occurs.

CHAPTER 3: THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF CHINESE CITIZENSHIP

CATEGORIES

Since the appearance of mankind on earth, thousands of countries have existed...All countries have the same sun and moon, all have mountains and rivers, and all consist of people with feet and skull; but some countries rise while others fall, and some become strong while others are weak. Why? ... I know the reason. A state is formed by the assembling of people. ... If we wish the nation to be secure, rich, and honored, we must discuss the way for 'renewing the people.' By Liang Qichao, 1902 (de Bary & Lufrano, 2000, p. 289)

This chapter introduces six categories of citizenship in the Chinese context, namely, (老) 百姓 (the common folk), 人民 (the people), 公民 (citizen), 网民 (netizen), 屁民/P 民 (shitizen), and 五毛 (the fifty-cent). These categories, some of them being ancient and traditional while others newly emerged from China's Internet culture, can be considered to be the Chinese people's interpretation of citizenship. Each term captures at least one prominent dimension of what it means to be an ordinary Chinese in this day and age. All of them remain relevant for our discussion of the changing notion and practice of citizenship in Internet-mediated China, not only in official propaganda discourse, but also in Chinese everyday talk. Ordinary Chinese invoke these categories to construct personal and collective identities; to unify and to divide the Chinese people across historical and political contexts through a binary classification of "friends" and "enemies;" and to express a "structure of feeling" (Williams, 1977) infused with social and

moral power. The choice they make, in terms of what categorical term they identify with, is culturally and politically meaningful in that each of these categories suggests a distinctive way of being, acting, feeling, dwelling, and relating (to the government and officials) in contemporary China. One of the main objectives in this chapter is to document this linkage between the past and the present, as a prelude to our discussion of a changing notion and practice of citizenship and government-people relationship in Chapter 4.

In what follows, I first provide a brief introduction to the notion of “citizenship” in the Chinese context, and discuss the historical evolution of the six citizenship categories in this research by tracing their etymological origin and documenting their meaning evolution. For the first three terms (*common folk*, *the people*, and *citizen*), their origins go back to ancient China and Chinese political culture, whereas the remaining three (*netizen*, *shitizen*, and *the fifty-cent*) are newly emerged categorical terms from China’s Internet culture in the twenty-first century. Lastly, I conclude this chapter by discussing the implications of analyzing these categories for understanding citizenship and the relationship between the state and its citizens in contemporary China.

3.1 Citizenship in China

The concept of *citizenship* in the Chinese context emerged in the late nineteenth century under Western influence, at a time when Chinese intellectuals were searching for ways to rebuild China as a strong nation-state in the face of Western imperialism and domestic pressures (Zarrow, 1997). One of the most influential intellectuals and reformists in modern China, Liang Qichao (1873-1929) proposed to his countrymen (quoted above) that in order to transform the Chinese

imperial regime into a modern nation-state, they needed to renovate Chinese people as self-disciplined and morally autonomous “citizens” instead of ignorant and passive “subjects” under imperial rule. Liang’s proposal, actually in tandem with the thinking of other prominent Chinese intellectuals’ (e.g., Kang Youwei and Sun Yat-sen), considered the renewal of Chinese people (i.e. citizen education and civic training) a fundamental solution to China’s problems in the 19th century. As historian Joan Judge (1997) noted,

The greatest challenge reformists faced in the early twentieth century was not Western gunboats or foreign technology, not institutional restructuring or constitutional law. It was ‘the people’ – the illiterate ‘lower levels of society’ (*xialiu shehui* or *xiadeng shehui*), the anonymous, unknowable, and often dreaded *min*, excluded from participation and power but always invoked in Confucian and reformist political and social discourse. (p. 165).

As such, *citizenship* entered modern China’s political culture and maintained a key socio-political term in Chinese political discourse all the way up to today’s China in the 21st century.

The meaning of citizenship, however, changes across different historical periods under the rule of different political authorities. As historians Merle Goldman and Elizabeth Perry (Goldman & Perry, 2002, p. 3) noted, “The Manchuts, Warlords, Foreign Imperialists, Nationalists, and Communists (under Maoist and post-Mao regimes) tried to impose quite different conceptions of citizenship upon the populations living under their control”. This variation has resulted in bewildering fluctuations in its boundaries (i.e. who are included and/or excluded) and contestations in its meanings (i.e. who they are and what they do) in contemporary Chinese public discourse.

3.2 Chinese Membership Categories of Citizenship

3.2.1 (老)百姓 (lǎo) bǎixìng/Common Folk

According to *Cihai*¹⁰ (1989) and *Ciyuan*¹¹ (1983), the two most authoritative encyclopedic Chinese dictionaries, “bǎi xìng” – which literally means “one-hundred surnames” – was first used as a general social address term for “a hundred officials” who owned land and titles in ancient China. According to Wilkinson (2015, p. 113), during the Zhou dynasty (1046 - 771 BC), only the educated elites (both male and female), outstanding elite members, and rulers possessed a surname (more accurately the ‘clan name’) and other names (e.g., given name, bestowed or inherited lineage name, and a courtesy name), while the commoners had no surname but only given name. It was not until the Han dynasty (202BC-220 AD)¹² that a family name was eventually held by all members of society. Before that, the possession of a surname (or a clan name) signified the rulers, officials, and elites’ ruling power and noble status in Chinese society and “bǎi xìng” became a membership category referencing all the members of the ruling class; but starting from the late Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BC), this term’s denotation and connotation began to change. 百姓 (bǎi xìng) was not an address form for the nobles and officials anymore, but a general social address term for all the common people who started to be

¹⁰ *Cihai* is the largest comprehensive Chinese dictionary in China, annotating Chinese words, idiomatic expressions, names of famous Chinese people and places, and terminologies in science and technology. It has been revised for six times since its first publication in 1936. The recent 6th edition came out in 2009.

¹¹ Compared with *Cihai*, *Ciyuan* focuses more on explaining classical Chinese words, phrases, and allusions. It is typically used as a reference book for research on classical Chinese. It was first published in 1915 and also underwent different revisions. The latest edition was published in 2005.

¹² According to Wilkinson (2015, p. 113), the emergence of a family for all members of Chinese society started in the late Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BC) and was well under way by the Warring States (475BC-221BC); but this process was not completed until the Han dynasty (202BC-220 AD).

identified with their family names. For example, in the Analects of Confucius, when Confucius's disciple Zilu asked the master what constitutes the superior man the master answered, “修己以安百姓, 尧舜其犹病诸” (xiuji yi'an baixing, yaoshun qi youbing zhu) which means, in English: “He cultivates himself so as to give rest to all the people; even Yan and Shun (the two great emperors) were still solicitous about this” (translated by James Legge <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/cfu.htm>). Here, the term “bǎixìng” is used as a broad social address referencing “平民 / píngmín” and “庶民 / shùmín” –all the “common people” in Chinese feudal society with the status of being lower-order subjects as opposed to the ruling class (aristocrats and officials).

Moving into modern Chinese society, this rather ancient social address term persists in current usage. Modern Chinese dictionaries typically gloss “bǎi xìng” as a collective address term for 人民(rénmín) –“the people” and 民众(mínzhòng) –“the masses” (*Hanyu Da Cidian*, 2001), or “people other than officials and soldiers” (Xiandai Hanyu Cidan, 2012). However, it is notable that at certain historical period, other collective membership categories (other than “bǎi xìng”) became the preferred terms in Chinese official and public discourses to represent the people under the state rule. For example, after the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949, the term “bǎi xìng” was replaced in the Chinese media by other social address terms such as *tongzhi* (‘comrade’), *qun zhong* (‘the masses’), and *ren min* (‘the people’) (Zhang, 2015), which are assumed to be in stronger alignment with the Communist ideology in the new China. Within Chinese history, the changing definitions of “bǎi xìng” from “shùmín” (common people) to “rénmín” (people) and to “rén” (person/people), according to Zhang (2015), suggests a progression of China from a highly hierarchical society to a socialist society where the historical

and political baggage associated with “bǎi xìng” is no longer suitable for China’s socio-cultural and political development.

Over one hundred years ago, Chinese scholar and reformer Liang Qichao proposed that Chinese people needed to be “trained” as “civil citizens” instead of thinking of themselves as “subjects” (under the emperor’s rule) in the process of transforming an ancient feudal China into a modern nation-state (Liang, 1989). This proposal made by Liang resembles the discontent expressed by contemporary Chinese intellectuals regarding the categorization of Chinese people as “(lǎo) bǎi xìng” (the common folk) and its implication for civil society and political participation in China. For instance, Chinese writer Wu Ruozeng (2007) wrote in his commentary “我不是老百姓/I Am Not a Common Folk”:

比方说罢，对于社会，我是一个“纳税人”，因此，我尝尝为此而自豪。这个自豪，当然就是说我意识到了我为社会作了贡献，我因此就有了监督政府职能部门和公务员们好好工作好好服务的权利。起码，我没了“小民”感，我腰杆儿就挺了起来，跟谁都可以平起平坐了。这种感觉，当然不是“老百姓”所能感觉到的。(…)

我觉得我觉醒了！觉醒了之后，我再听见有人叫我“老百姓”，我有些反感。因为我就认识到：现代社会，是一个平等的社会、法治的社会。在这样的社会中生活，人格权利、法律权利是平等的。而“老百姓”却给人一种不平等甚至有些卑微的感觉，好像相对的那一方有些特权、有些居高临下。它使我感到几千年的封建等级的余毒尚没有肃清，那条辫子还在脑袋后面隐隐地晃来晃去。

English translation:

For example, within the Chinese society, I am a “tax payer” and in which I take my pride. This pride lets me realize that I make my contribution to society and thus I am entitled with the rights to monitor the government and civil servants to do their job properly. At least, I won’t feel like a “petty people” anymore and I can stand up for myself because I am equal with everyone else. This feeling, of course, is out of reach for the “common folk.” (…)

I feel that I am enlightened now. With this awareness, I no longer feel comfortable when hearing people calling me a “common folk.” I understand that modern Chinese society is an equal society ruled by law. Within such society, everyone enjoys equal human rights and legal rights. But the category “common folk” implies an unequal relationship among

Chinese society, with the “common folk” being petty and low-status while the opposite group being commanding and privileged. This makes me feel that the pernicious vestiges of feudalism from ancient China thousands of years ago is still present, like a braid – the symbol of backward – hanging behind Chinese people’s head.

There are many categories with which the Chinese people can be identified, such as “tax-payers,” “consumers,” “citizens,” or “servers” working at restaurants. Compared with these categories, as Wu (2007) argued above, “common folk” is no longer a proper categorization of Chinese people. People in China should not see (or be seen) as members of the “common folk” in that the political baggage associated with this category is too disparaging and disempowering for people to fight for equality and social justice in a modern state ruled by law. As a social address term derived from feudal China and later employed by the Communist Party in their communication to mobilize the Chinese people, “common folk” is oftentimes used as a collective label to naturalize social structures and reinforce political ideologies.

Other Chinese intellectuals expressed the same concern with the inappropriateness of labeling Chinese people as common folk and some of them even contended that China’s modernization should start by abandoning this feudal term, forever (Cai, 2009; Shi, 2000). However, despite this widespread distaste for this categorical term among China’s intellectuals, “bǎi xìng” (common folk) has become popular over the last decade or so in major government-controlled media messages (e.g., CCTV News) and in activists groups’ online posts and petitions (Zhang, 2015). In her recent corpus-based investigation of the use of “common folk” in China’s mainstream media discourse, Zhang (2015) observed that this term is primarily associated with attributes such as lowliness, passivity, and powerlessness that still denote a chasm of power between “guanyuan” (government officials) and “bǎixìng” (common folk).

The term “bǎixìng” not only conveys a power imbalance between Chinese people and government officials, but also constitutes a particular kind of relationship between the two. When people are seen as “common folk,” they are positioned within Chinese society as “the passive, the powerless, and the weak” who have to completely rely on the government and officials’ protection in order to survive. Therefore, they are always at the mercy of government official who are expected to fulfill their obligations and responsibility as “parent officials” (a.k.a. 父母官/*fumu guan* in Chinese) taking care of the common folk and serving the interests of the people (Shi, 2000).

In summary, despite Chinese intellectuals’ distaste for this ancient social address term, “bǎixìng” remains a popular membership category in Chinese political and public discourses and this popularity does not seem just a coincidence, nor a thoughtless slip of the tongue. Chinese people choose to label themselves and/or their fellow compatriots as members of the “common folk” for pragmatic reasons (e.g., to mark their powerless position in Chinese society, to press on government officials for justice and equality), and the same is true when they choose to identify with other categories (e.g., gongmin/citizen) in order to fulfill their own political agenda (e.g., enacting their civil rights as a Chinese citizen). As such, we need to pay attention to Chinese people’s individual agency in their construction of citizenship and their negotiation of a new relationship with the government in the Internet era. This will shed light on crucial aspects of the political culture in contemporary Chinese society in relation to citizenship, governance, and government-people relationship.

3.2.2 人民 (Rénmín)/ The People

The term 人民 (*Rénmín*) can be traced back to ancient China (Wan, 2011), but the socio-political connotations associated with this category have evolved over China's long history.

According to *Cihai* (1963, 1989), the Chinese compound word 人民 (*Rénmín*) has three layers of meanings: 1) a general reference to the humankind; 2) a social address term for groups of people (i.e. common folk and ordinary people) as opposed to the ruling class (i.e., emperors and officials), and 3) an elastic membership category defined by the existence of “class enemies”.

The first two meanings associated with 人民 (*Rénmín*) were mainly used in ancient China. In ancient Chinese texts, this term was used to either talk about humankind in general (differing from animals and plants), or categorize common people as subjects ruled by feudal lords and emperors. For example, the Chinese philosopher Mencius (372-289 BC) said, “诸侯之宝三。土地、人民、政事。宝珠玉者、殃必及身。” (English translation by Charles Muller (2014): The feudal lords treasure three things: land, the people, and the government. Those who treasure pearls and jade invite disaster on themselves.) Here 人民 are typically understood as “common people” ruled by feudal lords and its connotation is very similar to that of 百姓 (“common folk”) discussed in the previous section. Although Mencius in his philosophy highlighted the significance of common people for any feudal lord's rightful rule (differing from Confucius's emphasis on the ruler), 人民 (as ruled subjects) were oftentimes described as being passive, ignorant, and marginalized in China's feudal hierarchy (Wan & Feng, 2007).

Moving into modern China, 人民 (as the first Chinese translation of the Western concept “citizen”) was associated with *nation, rights, freedom, adherence to law, obligations* and

equality (Guo, 2014; Wan, 2011). According to Wan (2011), the American missionary William Alexander Parsons Martin (丁韪良/Ding Weiliang) first translated the English term “citizen” into “人民 (Rénmín)” in his 1864 translation of “Elements of International Law” (万国公法/Wan Guo Gong Fa). Following Martin and a series of translations of Western legal documents in the late 19th century, along with Chinese intellectuals’ (e.g., Liang Qichao, Kang Youwei, and Sun Yat-sen) active learning and translation of Western social and political theories in early 20th century, 人民 (the people) was gradually established as the Chinese expression of “citizen” with modern political connotations such as civil rights, freedom, and political participation.

However, 人民 (rénmín) was not the only Chinese translation of “citizen” at that time. Two other terms—国民/*guomin* (literally “national people”) and 公民/*gongmin* (literally “public people”) also gained currency (Fogel & Zarrow, 1997; Harris, 2002). Some scholars even argued that these two terms, compared to 人民 (the people), were more closely related to the English term “citizen” in the Chinese context (Yang, 2013). Nevertheless, 人民 remains a key term in modern China’s political discourse and has developed a distinctive political meaning (Cong, 2005; Wan & Feng, 2007; Zhang & Song, 2010) that eventually went beyond the Western conception of “citizen” in the search by Chinese revolutionaries (such as Sun Yat-sen and Mao Zedong) for a new polity in modern China.

In his revolutionary vision of a new democratic China, Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925) deconstructed the category of 人民 (the people) in Chinese political discourse and attached new meanings to it that are very different from its ancient connotations (Wan & Feng, 2007). As one of the most influential revolutionaries in Chinese history, Sun wrote:

盖专制国以君主为主体，人民皆其奴隶，共和国以人民为主体，政府为之公仆，无贵族、平民之阶级，无主国、藩属之制度。... 但共和国家，即以人民为主体，则国家为人人共有之国家；即为人人共有之国家，则国家之权利，人人当共享，而国家之义务，人人亦共担。(孙中山全集，第二卷 p. 451)

English translation:

Every autocratic state takes its monarchy as the ruling subject and its entire people are treated like slaves; whereas in a republic people are sovereign and the government functions as a public servant to the people. There is no aristocracy, no ‘third estate,’ and no vassal relationship between nations. A republican state considers its people masters of the country, and national sovereignty is equally owned by people in this country. That is to say, everyone shares absolute rights and power as a member of this nation; similarly, everyone needs to fulfill their obligations to the nation. (Sun Yat-sen Complete Works, Vol.2, p. 451)

As Sun Yat-sen proclaimed in the passage above, 人民 shall not be treated like slaves in an autocratic state but rather be seen as equal participants in national affairs, with rights and obligations. In his political theory of 三民主义/*Sanmin Zhuyi* (“The Three Principles of the People”), Sun clearly states that a nation’s sovereignty belongs to its people and that “the people” are the “master of the nation” and government officials are public servants. In theory, Sun Yat-sen believed in the power of “the people” within a democratic and constitutional political structure in order to transform China into a modern and strong nation-state; while in practice, Sun contended that “once freed from the slavery of feudalism to become their own masters, the Chinese masses would be unprepared to lead and, with the establishment of democracy, would become anarchical and unruly” (Cai, 2010, p. 79).

Under Sun Yat-sen’s socio-political thoughts in the early 20th century, the meaning of 人民 (the people) changed drastically in terms of ordinary people’s “dominate position” in Chinese politics and the master-servant relationship between Chinese people and the state. This change deeply influenced Sun’s successor, Mao Zedong’s understanding of 人民 (the people) and the

pivotal role it plays in modern China's revolutionary causes against feudalism, imperialism, and capitalism. Unlike Sun's suspicion concerning the "low-quality" of Chinese people and their capability to lead a republican state, Mao Zedong (1893-1976) held stronger faith in the power of "the people" (especially peasants and workers), to such a degree that 人民 (the people) and their efficacy were sanctified by Mao's revolutionary theories.

人民 (the people), as a political term was further developed and enriched under Mao's political thoughts and influence in the 20th century (Wan & Feng, 2007; Zhang & Song, 2010). It became, more distinctively, a class/ideology-based membership category to clearly demarcate the "enemies" against whom Chinese people from all classes and social strata unify and fight. Who can be labeled as members of "the people" and which group should take a dominant position within "the people"? With respect to these two key questions, Sun and Mao gave different answers based on their political renderings of 人民 (the people) in the Chinese context. In Sun's conceptualization, workers, peasants, bourgeoisies, petty bourgeoisies (including intellectuals) are all members of "the people," but it is the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie who should take the leading position within the Chinese society. Mao's initial understanding about members of 人民 (the people) was similar to Sun's, however, Mao believed that workers and peasants should be included as the most important driving force in modern China's revolutions against feudalism, imperialism, and capitalism. Moreover, Mao stated that the membership makeup of "the people" should be subject to re-definition in accordance with actual situations of the revolution. In other words, who are considered members of "the people" and who are classified as the enemies of "the people" were constantly undergoing changes at different historical moments. For example, in his 1957 statement "关于正确处理人民内部矛盾的问题"

(About How to Handle People's Internal Conflicts Correctly), Mao claimed that during the Second Sino-Japanese War 1937-1945, all classes, social strata and groups who were against the Japanese invasion should all be considered members of 人民 (the people); while Japanese imperialists, Chinese traitors, and pro-Japanese groups were all enemies of "the people." When it came to the civil war period (1945-1949), however, the "enemies" label of was put onto American imperialists, bourgeoisies, landlords and the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) reactionaries, while people from any class, social stratum, or group who were fighting against these enemies belonged to "the people." It is notable that "the people" in modern China was not actually a symbolic indication of Chinese nationality or residence. Under the strong influence of Mao's political thoughts, the term 人民 (rénmín) was tinted with strong colors of *class* and *political ideology*, based on which "the people" became a powerful political weapon used by Mao and his followers in their propaganda campaigns to dichotomously categorize the Chinese people into "the people" or "the enemies." For Chinese individuals and groups, if they were excluded from the category of "the people" (e.g., landlords during the civil war period), they were then labeled as "enemies of the people". As such, they were subject to a series of retaliations and punishments. In this sense, 人民 (rénmín) was no longer just a membership label, but more importantly a powerful political mechanism with real and significant political consequences in China at that time. It is under the flag of "the people" that Chinese individuals and groups' social actions are legitimized and justified while at the same time other individuals and groups might be attacked, sanctioned, and even killed. This extreme power of 人民 (rénmín) during China's revolutionary era and later after the founding of PRC ultimately relates to Mao's

sanctification of “the people” in his political thoughts as well as the ubiquitous propaganda of the importance of 人民 under Mao’s regime (e.g., “serving the people”).

As mentioned earlier in this section, Mao deeply believed in the power of “the people” (especially workers and peasants) for leading modern China’s revolutions to success. Unlike Sun’s expressed concern about the low “quality” of common people, Mao put “the people” at a noble and sacred position in his political blueprint for modern China to achieve its communistic objectives. According to Wan and Feng (2007), in an essay published on the Liberation Daily (a Communist Party Paper founded by Mao) in 1944, Mao repeatedly emphasized that Chinese government leaders and officials were all servants to the people, and whatever they were doing was all for “serving the people.” In addition, Mao was found echoing the chanting crowds with “Long Live the People,” in response to the Party’ popular slogan of “Long Live Chairman Mao.” Mao’s sanctification and propaganda surrounding “the people,” although initially meant to mobilize and unify people from different classes and groups to partake in Chinese revolutions, remains influential in contemporary China in the 21st century.

From its old meaning of “imperial-ruled passive subjects” to Sun’s articulation of “active political participants” (under proper civic training) in a republican state, and eventually to Mao’s sanctification of “popular sovereignty,” the term 人民 (rénmín) has taken up a leading role in shaping modern China’s political terrain (especially regarding the relationship between the people and the state) and remains a key political expression in contemporary Chinese official and public discourses (as shown in the current dissertation project).

3.2.3 公民 /gōngmín/Citizen

The term 公民/ *gōngmín* (literally “public people”), like 人民 (the people) and 老百姓 (common folk), had been part of classical Chinese discourse since antiquity. According to Goldman and Perry (2002), the origins of *gōngmín* can be traced back to the Confucian celebration of public service. Although Confucius did not explicitly use the word 公民 in his writing (Nuyen, 2002), the character of *gong* (public, just, rule by many), in opposition to the *si* (private, unjust, rule by few), is absolutely a key concept in Confucian writings that emphasizes the social and communal aspects of being for the Chinese in the public realm rather than being individual-oriented or selfish. *Gōngmín* as “public people,” however, was explicitly used by Han Fei (or Han Feizi) – a very influential political philosopher of the Warring States (280-233BC) – to acclaim people who are willing to surrender their selfishness or personal interests to the nation and the public good (Chen, 2004). As a vigorous advocator of the “Chinese Legalist” school, Han Fei argued against the Confucian ideal on “government through virtue” by putting stress on laws (and law-making), administrative techniques, and the authority of the ruler. He believed that only through these mechanisms can a ruler establish order, maintain stability within the country, as well as entice people into public service while suppressing “private protégés”¹³.

¹³ The distinction between 公民 (public people) and 私人 (private people) and the danger of having fewer public people are clearly illustrated in Han Fei’s political writing 五蠹 (Five Vermin: A Pathological Analysis of Politics). Below is a quote from Han Fei:

故事私门而完解舍，解舍完则远战，远战则安。行货赂而袭当塗者则求得，求得则私安，私安则利之所在，安得勿就？是以公民少而私人众矣。(Naturally people would frequent the gates of the private residences of influential men so as to exempt themselves from military service. If exempted from military service, they keep aloof from warfare. If aloof from warfare, they can remain in safety. Again, if they can by virtue of bribes approach the authorities concerned, they get what they want. If they get what they want, they have profit and security. Wherever lie security and profit, how can the people do other than crowd in? Hence, citizens in public service are few but private protégés are numerous.)

(Accessed online at <http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/saxon/servlet/SaxonServlet?source=xwomen/texts/hanfei.xml&style=xwomen/xsl/dynaxml.xsl&chunk.id=d2.49&toc.depth=1&toc.id=0&doc.lang=bilingual>)

In addition to its strong association with the “public spirit” (or “公”), the term *gongmin* in ancient China signifies a feudal relationship of “dependence” between the *min* (people) and the *junzhu* (ruler). In China’s feudal past, the status of being a *gongmin* (君主之民 or 公家之民) was endowed by the ruler to officials and their families, in contrast with the *simin* (peasants working for private landlords).

The term 公民 (*gongmin*) was further developed in the 1900s by late Qing intellectuals and politicians under the influence of Western political thoughts and practices. Perhaps because of its strong connotation with the “public spirit,”¹⁴ *gongmin* became one of the Chinese expressions of “citizen,” along with several other distinctive terms such as *renmin* (the people), *guomin* (nation-state people), and *shimin* (city people) (Harris, 2002). Although for late imperial and republican-era intellectuals, these terms were used interchangeably to link the Chinese populace with a modern nation-state (Chen, 2004), each of these terms designates membership in rather different communities, highlights distinct aspects of the Chinese state-society relations, and more importantly, provides a pivot point of reference for Chinese intellectuals and politicians to imagine a modern nation-state, a citizenry and civil society in the Chinese context. The term 国民/*guomin* (nation-state people), for example, was adopted by late imperial reformist Liang Qichao to push his nationalistic political agenda of involving the populace in the making of China a modern nation-state, rather than developing autonomous individuals within the state

¹⁴ According to Goldman and Perry (2002), Mary Rankin and William Rowe argued that the Chinese concept 公/*gong* (public) in late imperial China bears resemblance to the Habermasian “public sphere” in that under the name of *gong* Chinese elites actively participated in political discussion, public deliberation and local activism.

(Goldman & Perry, 2002; Guo, 2015, Harris, 2002). For Liang and late Qing intellectuals alike, 国民/*guomin* was clearly a preferred term to designate the Chinese populace as “citizens” of China in that the “nation” (国/*guo*) was literally positioned before the “people” (民/*min*). The “nation” weighed more than “the people” in Chinese intellectuals’ blueprint of re-building China, and the strong sentiment of “nationalism” in late Qing and Republican-era elites’ discourse around *guomin* was very evident (Guo, 2014). In fact, during the period 1903-1915, this term surpassed *gongmin* and *shimin* in the press¹⁵ and became the most popular rendering of “citizen” (Guo, 2014). Over the course of the twentieth century, however, *gongmin* has largely replaced *guomin* and became the widely accepted category (in both official and popular discourses) to refer to persons who are legally recognized as members of a state (Goldman & Perry, 2002).

When Kang Youwei (1858-1927), a prominent political thinker and reformer of the late Qing dynasty, advocated the implementation of “local self-government” (*difang zizhi*) with an involved citizenry in 1902, he defined 公民 (*gongmin*) as, “Whoever has lived in a locality for a number of years, 20 years old or over, has a clean (*qingbai*) family background, never committed any crime, can afford to give alms to the poor, can pay ten dollars worth of tax may qualify as citizens¹⁶” (Lee, 1998, p. 41). According to Kang’s definition, the concept of *gongmin* is not only

¹⁵ According to Guo (2014), the term 国民/*guomin* appeared in Chinese public discourse (e.g., newspapers, journals articles, public speeches, etc.) much more frequently than 人民 (*renmin*) and 公民 (*gongmin*) during 1903-1915, especially in 1903.

¹⁶ Kang Youwei’s original definition of *gongmin* in Chinese is: 凡住居经年，年20以上，家世清白，身无犯罪，能施贫民，能纳十元之公民税者，可许为公民矣。凡为公民者，一切得署衙曰公民，一切得与齐民异。既为公民，得举其乡、县之议员，得充其乡、县、府、省之议员，得举为其乡、市、县、府之官。不为公民者，不得举其乡之议员，不得举充乡、县、府、省之议员，不得举充乡、市、县、府之官，一切权利，不得与公民等。(cited from Ma, 2003)

associated with a location (or a living place) and age, but also a person's economic standing and moral qualifications. By these criteria, only a small group of Chinese elite enjoyed the privileges of being a citizen. This restrictive categorization of citizenship did not seem to be problematic for Kang in that he actually "insisted on a sharp distinction in privileges between those who are citizens and those who are not" (Lee, 1998, p. 41). There was almost a consensus among late Qing intellectuals that the majority of Chinese populace was deemed not yet ready to participate in the political transformation of a two-thousand year old feudal China to a modern nation-state. Nevertheless, late imperial intellectuals held a strong belief in each Chinese person's capacity to be a better person. Kang Youwei was one of them. He maintained that by not granting citizenship automatically to everyone, the disqualified majority would be inspired to improve themselves to be a full-fledged citizen so that they can elect local officials and assemblies, as well as stand for election. These political rights were regarded as privileges enjoyed only by qualified Chinese elites who earned their title of *gongmin* through their financial achievements, social backgrounds, and moral qualifications.

Moral qualifications, as shown in Kang's definition of *gongmin*, were considered the most important aspect of an involved citizenry who could look beyond themselves and share the responsibility and the burden of nation-building through their political participation and self-rule at the local level. The imagination of a highly motivated and morally disciplined group of *gongmin* was essentially a result of the interaction between the Chinese neo-Confucianism and Western constitutionalism (Lee, 1998). Despite Kang's restrictive proposal of membership in this category, the Chinese expression of *gongmin* (as a rendering of the English word "citizen")

became the vehicle through which the Chinese populace came to learn and practice political citizenship from their western counterparts in terms of the duties, obligations, and rights of members of society in late Qing and Republican-era China. The translation of “citizen” (either as *gongmin* or *guomin*), as Guo (2015, p. 17-18) observed, helped to develop new kinds of political discourse and foster the imagination of a new polity with a different relationship between state and society in modern China.

Nonetheless, this new discourse of “citizenship” had to give way to the rhetoric of “class” emphasizing collectivism, class status, and the party line during the Mao era (1949-1976). As historians have noted, the opportunity to become a citizen with substantial political rights as well as responsibilities may have seemed possible during the first half of the twentieth century, but the aspiration to be a “comrade” (*tongzhi*) surpassed Chinese people’s political passion of becoming a citizen (Goldman & Perry, 2002; Guo, 2015) under the influences of Marxism and Mao’s political thoughts. In fact, during this time, the term *gongmin* (as citizen) hardly appeared in Chinese public discourse except in formal, legal, and propaganda documents (Keane, 2001, Li & Wu, 1999). It was not until 1953 that 公民 (*gongmin*) was articulated in the Law of Election of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and then in the first constitution of the PRC enacted in the following year. This constitution spelled out Chinese citizens’ (*zhongguo gongmin*) basic legal, political and civil rights but did not define the membership boundary of this category, that is, who can be a Chinese citizen? This question was not answered until 1982 when the revision of the constitution clearly indicated that whoever holds the nationality of the PRC is a citizen of PRC. It is interesting to note that unlike “the people” (*renmin*) who are written into the Chinese constitution as “the master of the state”, *gongmin* largely remains a legal concept based on its constitutional definition.

Moving into the post-Mao era and with Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening Up policy, concepts of "citizen" and "citizenship" re-entered the Chinese context and it was at this time that the Chinese intellectuals unanimously translated "citizen" as 公民 (*gongmin*). Unlike the discussion of citizens in the early decades (with a heavy focus on state-building), the meaning of *gongmin* since the mid-1980s has taken people's political, legal, and civil rights as its bases. In particular, this political "right consciousness" associated with *gongmin* spread from the educated elites to the general population of workers, peasants, the growing middle class, and religious believers (Goldman, 2005). Chinese expressions such as *gongmin yishi* (citizen rights consciousness), *gongmin quan* (civil rights) and *gongmin shenfen* (citizenship) became part of the common vocabulary for the educated elites and ordinary common people alike. More importantly, these phrases became the crucial political leverage for individuals to struggle for and protect their rights, especially for those marginalized individuals in society.

With the technological affordance of ICTs in the twenty-first century, Chinese people's struggle for citizen status and political rights surged unprecedentedly not only on the internet, but also on the urban streets, in parks and in remote villages. Much of the work on citizenship in China supports the argument that *gongmin*'s "right consciousness" expanded dramatically in Chinese society since late 1990s and naturally extended into China's cyberspace despite the government's repression and online censorship (Goldman, 2005). However, as Keane (2001) argued, the concept of *gongmin* itself remains ambiguous and even problematic when the Chinese leaders and political elites tried to incorporate a moral component, or *gongde* (civic virtue), into the notion and practice of citizenship in the context of China's market economy. Moreover, the denial of citizen-related civil rights and freedoms (as in liberal-democratic

societies) in China's official discourse makes many people feel disillusioned about their self-identification as "citizens of China".

In summary, *gongmin* originated in ancient political thinking (i.e. Han Feizi's legalist thought and Confucianism), initially referring to people living off the lands owned by feudal lords or the "public people" who were active in public affairs in contrast to the selfish "private persons" merely interested in chasing personal gains. The connection between "citizen" and "gongmin" (公民) was not made until the early twentieth century when late imperial Chinese intellectuals were searching for ways to rebuild China as a strong modern nation-state. Cultivating politically active and morally noble citizens (*gongmin*) became the solution. Educated elites and politicians in the 1900s passionately partook in the cause of developing a new Chinese polity on a par with western constitutionalism and fostering a new relationship between the ruling state and its people. Despite the late Qing intellectuals' passion for cultivating *gongmin*, political conversations about citizenship were brought to a halt when the general populace, under Mao's rule, was called upon to be "comrades" rather than "citizens." Nonetheless, in the 1980s *gongmin* (citizen) re-entered the Chinese political discourse and had reached a wider audience and developed a stronger focus on individual rights than in the 1900s. The Chinese people's right consciousness and struggle for citizen rights (*gongmin quanli*) are further developed through the affordances of ICTs in Chinese society in the Internet age, despite the government's firm control of uncensored information. Citizenship and citizen status seem have been wired into the Chinese public mind, but the category of "*gongmin*" (as a Chinese expression of "citizen") remains problematic for people in China who have had either been denied their right to participate in the country's political affairs, or been treated by the

government without reference to their citizen status (as an individual in possession of political, legal, civil, and economic rights).

3.2.4 网民/wǎngmín/ Netizen, 屌民/pì mín/Shitizen, and 五毛/wǔmáo/ the Fifty-Cent

Unlike the previous three terms (*baixing*, *renmin*, and *gongmin*) which all went through a long and complex history in China's political culture, *netizen*, *shitizen*, and *the fifty-cent* emerged out of Chinese people's extensive interaction with the Internet in the twenty-first century. As a number of scholars have observed, the use of the Internet in contemporary Chinese society has brought profound political, socio-cultural, and economic transformations in terms of the formation of a new discourse space, new identities (both personal and social), and the changing relationships between the state and the public (Herold, 2011; Shirk, 2011; Yang, 2009). One aspect of these transformations is represented by the extensive dissemination and normalization of new identity categories from the Internet to the whole Chinese society. *Netizen*, *shitizen*, and *the fifty-cent* are new membership categories of this kind that symbolize new ways of being and acting in Internet-mediated China. These categorizations communicate, from the Chinese point of view, new interpretations of Chinese membership/citizenship (i.e. what is it, in the new media environment, to be Chinese?), as well as new forms of relationships between the government and its citizens (i.e. what is it, in the new media environment, to be Chinese in relation to the ruling state?)

Netizen (*wangmin*), simply meaning “user of the Internet” is heavily loaded with political meaning in the Chinese context of lacking other forms of democratic participation within the country (Shirk, 2011). The significance of “netizen” as a membership categorical term in the

political realm is especially prominent in China, given the Chinese government's firm control over the press and uncensored information (Yang, 2009). First of all, the word *netizen* itself (both in Chinese and English) carries the meaning of a citizen because it combines *Internet* and *citizen* into one (Yang, 2009). Political actions (e.g., voting, lobbying, activism) in cyberspace has been increasingly normalized all over the globe, and citizens of different nations have frequently extended their views and actions into the online world in order to achieve their political agenda. Even in a country ruled by a single party, netizens have been able to access free and uncensored information, to write and disseminate their own views in a much freer fashion than what was possible in previous decades, and to coordinate collective action like petitions, boycotts, and protests. To many Chinese netizens, this kind of online political participation is what makes them feel like a "citizen" under the rule of Chinese Communist Party (CCP). By calling oneself (and others) a "netizen", the person is taking a political stance toward their own identity (being a savvy internet user and/or a member of the online community), as well as to the Chinese government. As Yang (2009, p. 217) noted, "the mundane netizens in China today are synonymous with being fearless, informed, impassioned, and not easily deceived."

The category of "netizen" being especially politicalized in the Chinese context is also related to this hegemonic view of the Internet and its users propagated by the Chinese government. It has been argued that the government has been quite ambiguous in its stance toward the role that the Internet plays in Chinese society (Herold, 2011). On the one hand the state has embraced the Internet as a necessary element of China's modernization, while on the other hand the Internet has been associated with various social problems and the state has started to exert a heavy control over the cyberspace as the size of the online population (netizens) keeps

growing¹⁷. According to previous studies (Golub & Lingley, 2008; Liu, 2011), the Internet in Chinese society is considered problematic in general, especially when it comes to Chinese youth and their obsession with the online world. Just as these negative connotations being attributed to the Internet through the dominant discourse in society, Chinese youth as well as the “netizens” (*wangmin*)” community in general are subject to this negativity with respect to what they say and do on the Internet. For example, Liu (2011) observed that China’s young people found themselves pressured to subscribe to a norm of being a “good netizen” in terms of how one should relate to the Internet (i.e., not as a recreational user who is addicted to the Internet but an instrumental user who is rational, mature, and responsible). Similarly, Szablewicz (2014) argued that the Internet may have served as a space in which notions of “ideal citizenship” and “patriotic leisure” are reinforced and imposed on the Chinese netizen community. It is notable that once Chinese netizens refuse to comply with the norm of the “good netizen” in cyberspace, they will be quickly denigrated as the “internet mob” (*wangluo baomin*). Furthermore, this negativity associated with “netizens” is sometimes carried into local politics in China. In 2009, Chinese netizen Zhang Xiaoli who has been active in local public affairs in Luoyang (in central China’s Henan Province), stimulated a big stir in a public debate about his entry as a representative at Luoyang Municipal People’s Congress (Beijing Review, 2009). Despite his long-term involvement in the administration of local affairs, many people opposed his position in the local congress in light of his netizen identity.

¹⁷ According to the report published by CNNIC in 2016, Internet users in China numbered 688 million by the December of 2015. This means that over half of the population in China now have access to the Internet.

Of course, the Chinese Internet is much more contentious and multifaceted than the government would want it to be. Netizens can always draw upon a competing discourse – circulated in the “counter-public” or co-cultural groups – to ascribe meaning to their online actions, and creatively invent new memes and categories to express their identity and living experience in China. For instance, scholars have noted that a rather vulgar term *diaosi*¹⁸ (屌丝 - loser) became the recent catchphrase for disillusioned young netizens to express what it means to be an ordinary Chinese in this day and age (Szablewicz, 2014; Yang, et. al., 2015). By embracing their membership in the *diaosi* community, young netizens subverted the state hypernormativity of what it is like to be living in China (i.e. the “tall-rich-handsome” or “fair-rich-beautiful”), expressed their disillusion with a disappointing Chinese society marked by inequality and a growing gulf between the rich and poor, and more importantly achieved a sense of cultural and affective intimacy and social solidarity.

屌民/*pimin* (shitizen) is another creation of Chinese netizens to express their shared sense of powerless and disenfranchisement as members of the Chinese state (Yang, et. al., 2015). The term 屌民 (shitizen), like *netizen*, is a compound consisting of “fart” (pi) and “citizen” (min) in Chinese. It was originated from a CCP cadre’s remark “you people are like a fart, my rank is the same as your Mayor’s” to a crowd gathered at a restaurant when he was accused of potentially molesting an eleven-year old girl on October 29, 2008 when he was forcing her to show him the way to men’s restroom. The official’s reaction to the accusation (including his remark to the

¹⁸ Literally translated as “dick string”, *diaosi* started to spear virtually on China’s Internet in 2012 and was regarded as one of the “buzzwords of the year” (or 年度热词 in Chinese) that year. It is typically used by Chinese young people to identify themselves as one of the losers in society who are characterized by being short, ugly, and poor; in contrast to the tall, rich and handsome.

crowd) was caught on the restaurant's surveillance camera and was subsequently posted online. Very quickly his remark went viral on the Chinese Internet and netizens began to use this catch phrase – “fart people” – to describe themselves and others. Eventually, *pimin* (shitizen) emerged as a new membership category for millions of Chinese people to express their deeply felt powerlessness and disenfranchisement, as well as their grievance over government officials' abuse of power. Not surprisingly, *shitizen* gained enormous popularity on the Internet and was listed as one of the “buzzwords of the year” in 2010.

Shitizen (*pimin*), as a somewhat playful expression of citizenship in contemporary China, is clearly laden with political meaning in that “fart people” itself communicates a power imbalance (and an antagonistic relationship) between ordinary Chinese citizens and the ruling government/officials, that is, “ordinary people are like farts to officials.” With such a sarcastic tone, people in China use *shitizen* as a membership category to create a collective national identity for millions of the powerless in opposition to the almighty state-government. As such, *pimin* becomes a powerful political expression for people in China to reject the official representation of what is it to be Chinese in this day and age (either as “citizens” or “netizens”) and to vent out their discontent and indignation at the government. Moreover, as Link and Xiao (2013) argued, the dissemination of the buzzword *pimin* (shitizen) from the online community to the mass media and eventually to the general public's everyday language use, suggests the normalization of this term for the Chinese to conceive their existence in Chinese society and their relationship with the ruling state. That is, ordinary people are just “fart people” and the government (or “*tianchao*-heavenly dynasty”) can easily abuse its power and treat its people like a fart.

Our last membership categorical term in this section, 五毛 *wumao* (the fifty-cent) has a different political edge in comparison with “netizen” and “shitizen.” The “fifty-cent” or “fifty-cent party” (*wumao dang*) was originated from the government’s Internet policing which not only represses dissenting views but also encourages the “correct” speech in favor of government policies on the Internet (Link & Xiao, 2013a). Beginning in 2004, people could assumedly earn fifty cents for each pro-government comment they posted on the Chinese Internet. Soon thereafter, the term “*wumao dang*” (fifty-cent party) –sometimes simplified as “*wumao*” (fifty-cent), gained its popularity among Chinese netizens as a derogatory and sarcastic term to talk about those who were believed to be paid off fifty cents for each post they put up online.

The most distinctive feature associated with the category of “fifty-cent party” was originally about their absolutely positive stance toward the government (and its policies) in their online posts; however, as time goes on, it is increasingly difficult and contentious for netizens to ascribe this categorical label to other netizens merely on the basis of a “pro-government” post. It is partly because these government-hired commenters are getting more skilled at disguising their political stance by presenting an image of themselves as “just an ordinary person” and by effortlessly mingling with the majority of Chinese netizens online. In addition, because of the contentious nature of this category, netizens sometimes declare themselves as a member of the “fifty-cent party” on the Internet in order to attract more attention to their own posts. As such, they became the “self-paid fifty-cent” (*zifei wumao*-自费五毛), as netizens wittily noted. Occasionally, this pro-government stance is detected from foreigners’ comments on China-related events and incidents. For those foreigners, Chinese netizens label them as the “foreign fifty-cent” (*yang wumao*-洋五毛) to mark their political alignment with the Chinese government.

However, it is always unclear whether this categorical label based on the content of the commenters' writing indicates a sincere alignment with the Chinese government.

To sum up, all the three terms discussed in this section are very different from the previous categories (*common folk*, *the people*, and *citizen*) in the sense that they originated from China's Internet culture, all carrying a playful yet sarcastic tone, and communicating a perspicuous stance toward the Chinese government. The origination and dissemination of these categories from the Internet to the general public suggest that people in China are actively participating (both online and offline) in constructing new identities for their being, acting, feeling, dwelling and relating to the Chinese government.

3.3 Conclusion

Through documenting the historical evolution of these six categories, the chapter sheds light on the current conversations about *citizenship* and *governance* in China's Internet-mediated society. What is it like to be Chinese? How do people in China negotiate new forms of relationships with their government? What are the implications of these findings for understanding *citizenship* and *governance* in contemporary Chinese society? To answer these questions, as I would argue, a historical understanding of citizenship membership categories is necessary in that they provide insights into the changes, complexities, and dynamics in Chinese people's understanding of the government and its governance (as the legitimate ruling state or

otherwise), as well as the people themselves (as citizens or otherwise). Moreover, discussions in this chapter offer a profound historical background in which the rich and meaningful interpretation of contemporary Chinese people's use of citizenship categories in the following chapters is made possible.

CHAPTER 4: CASE ANALYSIS #1: THE ZHOU JIUGENG EVENT

In light of the historical evolution of citizenship categories in China, this chapter brings these categories into the current age, against the background of a changing social contract between the Chinese people and the state, mediated by the increasing use of the Internet. All of the six membership categories discussed in Chapter 3 are active in the online public discourse surrounding the “Zhou Jiugeng Event” – the first case study of this dissertation project. This chapter will pay attention to all these membership categories in terms of how they are used by Chinese online commenters to accomplish social and political actions of various kinds. The objective of this chapter is to provide a situated, historically and culturally sensitive understanding of how people categorize members of Chinese society under different membership labels, how a certain kind of social conduct is normalized as the defining features of members from a specific category. In addition, we examine the implications of these categorization practices in Chinese cyberspace for understanding Internet-mediated social change in China with a particular focus on “citizenship” and government-people relationships.

Before we dive into the analysis, it is important to note that it is neither desirable nor possible to demarcate a clear boundary between these membership categories, and that it is not my intention to locate the actual “real” members of different categories. In fact, membership references in this case are sometimes overlapping, despite their differences. It is also notable that

in this case study online commenters discuss more extensively (than in the second case) about how members of these categories are generally perceived by the populace; how they relate to the government; and what they are capable of in terms of fomenting social change in Chinese society.

In what follows, I first describe the defining features associated with each membership category as how it is used by online commenters to construct their membership within these categories and to express their views on governance in China. During the analysis, I also pay attention to how online commenters contest the defining categorical features and how they distinguish one category from another based on their construction of these categorical features. Next, I examine how online commenters talk about the current government and officials from the perspective of a certain category (e.g., *netizen*), and how they characterize the relationship between the people and the government/officials in China. Based on this examination, I conclude the chapter by highlighting key observations from the analysis and show how Chinese commenters play with these categories in order to achieve their own political agenda.

Table 4.1 The distribution of key membership categories in Case #1

Membership Categories	Occurrences	Occurred in No. of data files/all files	Percentage ¹⁹
人民/ren min People	1864	77/112	68.75%

¹⁹ The percentage is presented here to show the distribution of these categorical terms across the database.

(老)百姓 ²⁰ /(lao) bai xing Common folk	1464	74/112	66.07%
网民/wang min Netizen	1064	68/112	60.71%
屁民 & P 民 ²¹ / pi min Shitizen	510	50/112	44.64%
五毛 & 5 毛/ wu mao Fifty-Cent	370	34/112	30.36%
公民/gong min Citizen	106	26/112	23.21%

Defining features are described in this section pertaining to two central questions in our understanding of the use of categories of citizenship in contemporary Chinese society (as well as the experience of living as members of a specific category): 1) How are members of each category typically perceived in China and 2) What are members of each category capable of when it comes to social change, particularly regarding corruption within Chinese government? The first type of defining features relate to the perceived images of category members, or in other words, the most salient characteristic(s) that online commenters use to categorize members of each category. As mentioned in the chapter overview, some categories (such as “the people”

²⁰ Both of the terms “百姓/bai xing” and “老百姓/lao bai xing” are used in the Chinese online discourse, although the latter expression is used more frequently (with a frequency of 1024) than the former one (440 times). In my analysis, these two terms are put into the same category mainly because that Chinese commenters treat these two terms interchangeable and referring to the same group of people, although 老百姓/lao bai xing is the more colloquial expression.

²¹ In Chinese language, the word “屁” (literally means “fart”) is considered a very vulgar and rude expression, as a euphemism, the English letter “P” is used to replace the word “屁” in the Chinese expression “屁民/shitizen” because they have the similar sound in their pronunciation. As such, both of the terms are searched in the data files and compiled under the same category of “shitizen.”

and “the common folk”) share similar categorical features (e.g., a sense of moral superiority), nonetheless, there are fundamental differences that set these terms apart. The second column describes the “normative conduct” associated with each category, especially in relation to members’ capability to create social-political change in China.

4.1 Common Folk/Lao baixing/老百姓

The “common folk” (*lao baixing*) in this case were portrayed as a powerless and marginalized group of people who were often the target of being exploited, deceived, and fooled by government officials and other elites due to their low economic and social status in Chinese society. Online commenters invoked the category, no matter whether they identify themselves as a member of this group or not, not just to depict this rather unfortunate reality for the common folk in China but more importantly to construct a highly adversarial relationship between government officials and the common people. For instance, in Data Examples 4.1, the commenter in C1 metaphorically draws a connection between Zhou’s (the corrupt official) luxury lifestyle and the common folks’ lifeblood to vividly represent the exploitive relationship between the two. In C2 and C3, both commenters used the linguistic technique of “extreme case formulation” to construct a socio-political reality in which common people are constantly denigrated, deceived, and even dehumanized by officials.

Data Examples 4.1 ²²

C1: 看他那一脸的肥油，不知道喝了多少老百姓的血。

Look at his (an official's) greasy face, don't know how much blood he has drunk out of the common folk.

C2: 老百姓永远都是被剥削、被欺骗、被忽悠的对象。

Common folks are always the target of being exploited, deceived and tricked.

C3: 这社会没人性的畜牲太多了，完全不把老百姓当人看！！！！

There are just too many inhumane bastards in this society who don't treat common people as human at all.

Many online commenters frequently associated the “common folk” with categorical features such as being “pathetic” (*kelian*), marginalized, and “fooled” (*huyou*) by the government. This is similar to Zhang’s (2015) observation that “*baixing*” (the common folk) in Chinese media are usually positioned as “politically powerless” and “economically impoverished.” Given their particular positionality within Chinese society, it is normatively expected that the common folk are in great need of protection from government officials based on the cultural notion of “parent officials” in China’s Confucian political tradition (Shi, 2000). Moreover, as we discussed in Chapter 3, in modern China’s political culture, this “official-serving-the people” relationship had been further engrained in Chinese people’s mind through state propaganda. This officially prescribed relationship is closely related to one of the key issues in the “Zhou Jiugeng Event” when Zhou made the remark – “lifting the housing price in China is really for the benefit of the common folk and I have to be responsible for them.” This remark immediately enraged the general public, followed by heated discussions and online searches for the potential evidences of

²² These data examples (or comments) are not contiguous in the data. They are comments posted by different commenters but for analytical purposes they are clustered together to illustrate a common theme regarding a specific membership category. “C” is the abbreviation for Comment, thus C1 means the first comment in this data example.

Zhou's corruption. Many online commenters called Zhou's remark an abomination, questioning his self-portrayal of being a "parent official" who was responsible for the welfare of common people while in reality it was the common people who had to suffer from this regulation – namely, purchasing a home at a higher price. Not only so, they also invoked a moral sanction for Zhou's breach of norms associated with the "parent official" category despite his disclaimer to the public about being responsible for the common folk. As shown in C4 and C5, both commenters not only noted how repelling Zhou's remark was but also pointed out how Zhou's words (and actions) had violated the norm of "a parent official serving the public." Here Zhou as a government official was constructed as a hypocrite, a liar, as well as someone lacking a sense of morality. As such, a public moral judgment of Zhou Jiugeng and his conduct were deemed necessary and reasonable. Interestingly, although commenters in Data Examples 4.2 did not explicitly categorize themselves as members of the common folk, they all articulated their moral judgment and moral sanctions from the position of a common folk. Given the positionality of common folks in Chinese society and their relationship with government officials (as embedded in the traditional Chinese political culture), it seems reasonable to argue that this category offers a unique moral position from which online commenters were able to make a compelling moral critique and sanction of corrupt Chinese officials like Zhou.

Data Examples 4.2

C4: 还打着对老百姓负责的口号，真够恶心的！

Zhou even talked about what he did under the banner of "being responsible for the common folk", so disgusting!

C5: “查处不是为了处罚开发商降价亏本卖房子，而是担心其造成的后果，我要对老百姓负责”。-----周狗官语录，多么冠冕堂皇啊？！啊？？？你这样的私心，

能代表老百姓吗？你讲这一句话的时候，你的心灵会感到无愧吗？有没有负罪感？？？

“Investigation is not to penalize real estate developers who sell houses at a loss, but to take precautions against the possible consequences of developers selling cheap houses. I need to be responsible for the common folk.” This is the quote from Zhou this shitty official, such high-sounding words. ahhh? How can you represent the (interests of) common folk when you have such selfish motives? Isn’t your soul ashamed when you said this? No guilty?

C6: 如今当官的真是气派！怎么能这样呢，老百姓不是主人吗？怎么成了仆人吃香喝辣，人民吃糠咽菜？

Today’s officials are so powerful and arrogant! How can it be like this, isn’t common folk the master? How can the servants live such a luxury life while the people suffer?

C7: 不要再把“为人民服务”挂在嘴上，伤害了老百姓的情感，不能再愚弄老百姓的智商！！！！

Don’t ever talk about “Serving the People” again, you’ve hurt common folks’ feelings but you must not continue to undermine common folks’ intelligence!!!!)

C8: 给周腐败一个忠告。不要把几百年前的老套官话来愚弄老百姓了。现在都什么时代了。你没进步呀。

This is a sincere advice for Zhou, the corrupt official. Don’t attempt to use the official cliché of hundreds years ago to continue fooling the common folk. What era is now? You haven’t improved at all.

In addition to their expressions of moral judgment and sanction, online commenters further problematized the whole propaganda discourse of Chinese officials as “parent officials serving for common folks (and the people).” In the context of rampant government corruption, many online commenters challenged this dominant image of Chinese officials as “parent officials” and the officially embellished relationship between government officials (as “servants”) and the common people (as the “master”). This relationship, as the commenter commented in C6, is actually reversed in contemporary Chinese society. It has been the common people serving the officials –feeding them with their tax money –while government officials are in no ways being held accountable to the public. Many commenters reacted strongly against Chinese officials’

incessant rhetoric of “serving the people” to treat the common folk as nothing but fools. In C7 and C8, commenters requested officials like Zhou to stop using this hollow political slogan of “serving the people” to deceive the people, and indicated that a new language of framing was necessary to capture a changing relationship between government officials and common people in the contemporary era. This online response could well be interpreted as a call for social change initiated by China’s common folks who are very aware of the government’s propaganda regarding official-civilian relationships. But, how do these common folks actually think about their capability of fomenting social change in China, especially in regard to anti-corruption?

In light of the portrayal of “common folks” as powerless and pathetic, we may expect a rather “passive” tone regarding their capability of creating social change in China. However, this expectation only captures a partial picture of what online commenters discussed in relation to this matter. Heated discussions emerged among online commenters regarding their capability to create social change in China, and differing from Data Examples 4.2, online commenters were more likely to claim this “common folk” identity in these discussions about their capability to make a change.

As shown in Data Examples 4.3, all commenters suggested, in one way or another, that members of “common folks” could only take “limited actions” in response to government officials’ corruption in Chinese society. In particular, commenters in C9 and C11 fully rejected the potential involvement of common folks in anti-corruption (反腐/*fanfu*), let alone for their actions to make any substantial impact. Although these commenters agreed that there was not much the common folk could do, they communicated different stances in their comments about these limited actions (e.g., publish blogs/posts on the Internet). The commenter in C10, for example, acknowledged the severity of government corruption in Chinese society and the

limitation of common folks, but was still hopeful about mobilizing online public opinion to press the government for a potential change. However, the commenter in C11 basically dismissed the potential efficacy of common folks' online actions (including mobilizing public opinions as suggested in C10) and urged all members of the "common people" to keep detached from politics and mind their business within the private spheres. In contrast, the commenter in C12 seemed to deeply believe in the possibility of combating corrupt officials through online actions such as posting and topping comments, in spite of the recognition of common people as "petty" and "not even being granted the status of 'citizen' by the government." This positive perception of common people's capability for making a change through the Internet was further magnified in C13 where the commenter was very passionate about participating in "online anti-corruption" (*wangluo fanfu*) to such a degree that members of "common folks" were willing to be sacrificed as the "cannon fodder" if that's what was needed for change to happen.

Data Examples 4.3

C9. 现在反腐也就 D 内斗争的工具,和政治工具,跟老百姓已经无关

Nowadays anti-corruption is simply a political tool for CCP's internal struggle; it has nothing to do with the common folk.

C10. 这年头见怪不怪了,贪污的多了去了。被抓的还是少的。看来现在老百姓也就可以指望点舆论压力了。

This is not uncommon anymore, so many corrupt officials but only a few were caught. Now it looks like the common folk can only resort to the pressure of public opinion.

C11. 大家不要说了 这就是中国 我深爱的中国

第一: 我们说了有用嘛? 我们都是老百姓

第二: 官官相互, 就算双规了, 过段时间继续当官

第三: 谁敢说现在的当官的屁股干净

所以不要说了 你们算个鸟 这句话是至理名言啊 大家好好工作吧! 多孝顺父母, 多陪陪家人

Everyone, no need to say, this is China, my beloved China. First, does it matter what we say? We are all the common folk. Second, officials will of course shield each other, even if Zhou was investigated and detained, he could continue his government post somewhere else. Third, who dares to say there are still “clean” officials nowadays? So stop talking, “you are nobody” this is the true wisdom. We all do our job, be filial to our parents and spend more time with our families.)

C12. 兄弟们 我们都是小老百姓，甚至连公民都算不上 号召下，我们没有太多能做的 让我们天天来顶这样的帖子，让大家都看看什么是公仆

Brothers, we are all petty common people, let alone being treated as citizens. Under this call (for anti-corruption), there is not much we can do, but at least let's come online and top up this kind of blog post everyday, let everyone see what the public servants are like.

C13. 网络给老百姓有参与反腐的机会；老百姓当枪使也愿意；对！当这样的枪咱老百姓很愿意！

Internet offers a chance for common people to partake in anti-corruption; common people are willing to be the cannon fodder; yes, we the common folk love to be such cannon fodder!

As we discussed above, there is a mixed reaction toward common people's (*lao baixing*) capability to combat government corruption and to foment social change in general. This mixed reaction (or contestation) was especially centered on question of whether common folks should initiate a revolution against the CCP (Chinese Communist Party). For example, a *Tianya* post appeared online four days after the exposure of Zhou Jiugeng on the Internet, questioning whether Zhou (as a local municipal official) could afford such expensive cigarettes and his claim of “being responsible to the common folk.” Commenting on this post, online commenters expressed their deep concerns about corrupt party officials and the Chinese political system, and called for urgent political reforms in China. These online conversations revealed that members of “the common folk” held two radically different views regarding whether people (*min*) in China, especially the “common folks”, should engage in an uprising in order to rectify the political system. As shown in Data 4.4, the commenter in C14 claimed that common folks had no alternative but to resort to an uprising (or revolution) in order to make a difference. This helpless

call for rebellion encapsulates common people's reaction to official conduct and government corruption in China. In response to Zhou's corruption and his provoking remark of "being responsible for the common folks," a large number of online commenters expressed extreme anger with Chinese government and officials. Among these commenters, some of them either hopelessly or enthusiastically called for common people to participate in a revolution in order to change the status quo.

Data Examples 4.4

C14. 真的逼老百姓造饭啊

This is really forcing the common folk to rebel!

C15. 你错了，是官逼你反，不是官逼民反，不要把你的仇恨逼普通老百姓为你做无谓的炮灰。99.999%的人最多平时有点小牢骚，第二天饭照样吃，班照样上。日子还是越过越好的。当然，不如意的也有，但你不如意，也别拉着别人给你当炮灰啊，有本事你自己去做英雄，我等屁民搬个小马扎，嗑瓜子看你们对掐，不亦乐乎，两边都不是好东西，死了谁咱都放鞭炮，呵呵。²³

You're wrong, it is that officials force you not the people to rebel. Don't impose your hatred on ordinary common folks and let them to be your meaningless cannon fodder. 99.999 percent of the people grumble sometimes at most, but the next day they continue their life, eating and working as usual. Life is getting better and better. Of course, there are people who are not successful and unhappy, but even if you're unhappy, you cannot drag others to be your cannon fodder. If you are capable, you can be the hero yourself. Shitizens like me would sit on the stool; cracking sunflower seeds and watching you fight against officials. What a delight. Neither side is good, whoever died I will set off firecrackers, hehe.

→C16. 你错了，是官逼你反，不是官逼民反??? (什么意思?这个你不是民?)

"You are wrong, it is that officials force you not the people to rebel???" what do you mean? you are not one of the people?)

²³ The commenter in C15 was not responding to C14 in the data, but s/he was probably responding to someone who was making a similar argument (like in C14) about the common folk being forced to rebel.

→C17. 这还难理解? 你个人不能代表全民。你觉得你委屈你受到不公正待遇, 你可以自己去讨个公道, 你是抱煤气罐还是拿菜刀随你喜好, 但请不要鼓动别人去当炮灰, 懂了吗? 别人没有责任替你去当炮灰。

Is this hard to understand? You as an individual cannot represent the entire people. If you feel that you have been wronged or treated unfairly, you can go and find your justice, whatever that means for you, either taking a gas tank or carrying a cutting knife, but please don't instigate others to be the cannon fodder, understand? Others have no responsibility to be the cannon fodder on your behalf.

This “common folks-as-revolutionaries” view evoked heated debates among online commenters. As shown in Data Examples 4.4, the commenter in C15 not only opposed the idea that common folks wanted a revolution and that they wanted to be involved in it, but also constructed two types of members within the “common folk” category, namely, the “hateful revolutionaries” and the “shitizen-like commoners.” Clearly this commenter identified with the latter. In order to distance himself²⁴ from corrupt officials and the “hateful revolutionaries,” the commenter categorized himself as one of the “shitizens” who was only passionate about “witnessing” (围观/*weiguan*) and “topping” (顶贴/*dingtie*) others’ posts online and would not engage in anything as radical as starting a revolution. In response, another commenter in C16 challenged this commenter’s rather distant and divisive stance in C15 by questioning whether he actually belonged to the broader category of “the people” (*min*). C16 problematized this divisive view painted in C15 that there were two types of common folks, and suggested that everyone (except officials) in China is a member of “the people” (including common folks). By questioning the legitimacy of the commenter in C15 disassociating himself from the common folks and the people, the commenter in C16 attempted to forge a common ground among

²⁴ It is important to note that “himself” is used in the analysis as a third-person pronoun to refer to commenters without suggesting whether that person is a man or woman.

members of the common folk with greater solidarity. However, the same commenter in C15 continued this debate further by separating the individual (*geren*-个人) from the collective group (*quanmin*-全民), that is, individuals who were wronged by the government should rely on their individual means of fighting for justice instead of dragging others down with them (see C17). These “individual means,” as described in C17, were rather extreme and hateful (e.g., self-explosion). What the commenter in C 17 argued was that only radical and extreme individuals (like the commenter in C14 and C16) in China would want to rebel, and that the majority of common folks wanted nothing revolution-alike but a normal and peaceful life.

Although “common folks” are primarily perceived as powerless and pathetic in Chinese public discourse, they are not completely passive when it comes to curbing government corruption and fomenting social change in general. As reflected in the online talk, ordinary people in China are well aware of problems of government corruption and a failing legal system that has not been able to effectively supervise official conduct and curb corruption within the government. As such, common folks have to fight corruption and protect their own interests by turning to the Internet (especially the wide-spread human flesh search) to expose and morally punish corrupt officials. However, there is a counter-argument against this proactive approach and the effectiveness of common folks participating in anti-corruption by contending that common people have been taken advantage of by the central government in the whole online anti-corruption movement and that they are most likely to be the sacrifice within the political power game under a single-party rule. Moreover, this counterargument contends that corruption is like a cancer in Chinese society so that there is no point for common folks to partake in collective actions to “clean” the society and to reason with officials. In addition, a similar debate emerged out of discussions on whether the common folk should rebel given their economic and

socio-political sufferings in contemporary China. One group argued that due to the severity of corruption and other social problems (e.g., inequality and the Party's power abuse), common people had no choice but to resort to revolution in order to make a change. In contrast, the other group contended that it was of no use for the commons to rebel since they are most likely to die for nothing and that it is much wiser for them to continue their peaceful life.

In summary, online commenters used the category of “the common folk” to construct not only a collective identity for a group of people who have been economically, socio-politically, and culturally marginalized in Chinese society, but also an oppressive and adversarial relationship between members of this category and (corrupt) government officials. In particular, commenters invoked the category of “common folks” in order to perform a compelling moral critique and sanction on corrupt Chinese officials. In particular, they challenged the traditional image of “parent officials” as propagandized in China's official and media discourses. Many commenters also attempted to subvert the relationship of Chinese government-people as entailed by this propaganda discourse of “parent officials.” Additionally, commenters explicitly linked this category with “an uprising” (or “a revolution”) in their discussions about how to create socio-political change in China, especially for common folks if they anticipate for a change of the status quo. While commenting on this issue, a majority of the commenters directly claimed the “common folk” identity and from this positionality they attempted to reason with each other regarding the question—whether an uprising was a necessary and correct means to create socio-political changes in contemporary Chinese society. As a result, two types of “common folk” were constructed based on commenters' divergent views on this question, which further demonstrated a tension among members of this group in regard to questions of how to relate to

the ruling government and whether an uprising is what it takes to foment sociopolitical change in China.

4.2 The People/Renmin/人民

“The people” category is, first and foremost, used by online commenters to ridicule this propagated people-government/official relationship in Chinese official discourse, in particular the communist party’s formulation of “serving the people” under Mao and its ramifications in contemporary China. This formulation at the Maoist era served as not only a guiding principle for party officials but also a strong centripetal force to bond the people and the party together. Underlined by this slogan was a specific kind of people-Party/official relationship that is still highly visible in contemporary China’s official and commercial discourses (Davies, 2013). Within this Party-propagated relationship, the people are hailed as “master of the nation” while government officials are portrayed as “public servants” (公仆/*gongpu*) whose major duty is to wholeheartedly devote themselves to serving the people, their needs and interests. However, as many online commenters noted in this case, this “master-servant” relationship remains merely a fairytale in the state’s hollow propaganda talk as people have gradually come to the knowledge of how easy and prevailing it is within the current political system for officials to jeopardize the interests of the people due to the abuse of power and corruption. In response, “online mocking” emerged as a normative discursive practice for Chinese commenters to resist and subvert this empty propaganda of “officials serving the people.” As shown in Data Examples 4.5, commenters expressed their disbelief and resentment toward the Party’s ideological propaganda

of a “master-servant” relationship in China. More interestingly, the commenter in C19 appropriated a popular political slogan during China’s revolution era in the mid-20th century – Mao Zedong’s famous revolutionary remark, “to overthrow all the reactionaries” – to subvert this “master-servant” relationship by reframing Party/government officials not as “people’s servants” but “reactionaries” (i.e. “enemies of the people”) who had to be defeated.

Data Examples 4.5

C18 别大惊小怪了~~~~ 为人民服务党 本身就是一邪恶组织

Don’t make a fuss. Serving the people? The Party itself is just an evil organization.

C19 旗帜鲜明的打倒人民公仆!!

We must have a clear-cut stand to overthrow People’s Servants!!

In addition to blatantly expressing their criticism and opposition to the Party and government officials, online commenters engaged in subtler but playful and more sophisticated discursive practices to deride the propagation of “serving the people” in Chinese political discourse. These creative, playful, and sometimes subversive practices online have been an important feature of Chinese Internet culture and politics (Esarey & Xiao, 2008; Yang & Jiang, 2015). According to Yang and Jiang (2015), online political satire can take on different forms (such as *duanzi* or jokes, parody, national sentence-making²⁵, multimedia remix, online

²⁵ National sentence-making, or *quanmin zaoju* (全民造句) in Chinese, refers to “the emerging online practice of remaking and circulating popular phrases and sayings.” (Yang & Jiang, 2015, p. 219). These sayings are typically derived from controversial social and political events in China, then went viral on the Internet as a catchphrase that quickly permeated to everyday interactions (both online and offline) in China. The most famous example, as Yang and Jiang (2015) discussed in their article, is the saying of “My father is Li Gang” that has been frequently invoked to criticize Chinese officials’ (and their children) power abuse. The expression was originated from a 22-year old son of a local official named Li Gang.

performance art, and online news comments) and fulfills both a political function of expressing resistance and a ritual function of socialization and relationship building in cyberspace. Although scholars cautioned that online political satire (e.g., e gao²⁶) might not always be interpreted by its audience as an expression of political resistance and opposition (see Nordin & Richaud, 2014), there is a consensus that it is a creative and playful form of political expression resulting from China's complex conditions of politics, technology, history, and culture, even if it does not lead to a revolution or political reforms (Meng, 2011; Tang, 2013; Yang & Jiang, 2015).

Online political satire, in the current study, is mostly accomplished through two discursive practices – *parody* and *irony*, both of which have been identified as highly politically charged practices to mock official ideology on the Chinese Internet (Li, 2011; Tang, 2013; Yang & Jiang, 2015). Online commenters parodied official formulations and catchphrases to mock official ideology embedded in the political slogan of “serving the people.” For instance, in Data Examples 4.6, the commenter in C20 not only appropriated the formulaic expressions of a departmental (as well as the Party) meeting and popular political slogans (e.g., “Three Represents” from former Chinese president Jiang Zemin), but also mimicked the tone of an official speech (i.e., full of hollow messages, being stereotypical and rigid) that has been deeply implanted into the public mind through the prevailing dissemination of Party media within Chinese society. Even though the commenter in C20 did not explicitly mention any of the

When the son was pulled over for a traffic accident, the remark “Sue me if you dare. My father is Li Gang” was thrown at the security guards on the site.

²⁶ “E gao” (恶搞) or “online spoofs” is a Chinese term used to describe a new communicative and cultural practice emerged on the Chinese Internet in which netizens employ all types of audio, visual and textual formats to poke fun at power, social and political equality in China and to create an emotion bonds among participants (Meng, 2011).

official formulations, the references of “XXX-ism (xxx zhuyi),” “XXX Thought (xxx sixiang),” and “X Represents (x-ge daibiao)” are self-evident to the Chinese audience due to the high visibility and recognizability of these political slogans – *Marxism*, *Mao Zedong Thought*, and *Three Represents* – in contemporary Chinese political discourse. Utilizing the discursive strategy of intertextuality and parody, the commenter was able to reinvent the image of government officials as wholeheartedly devoting to corruption and “fooling the people” and to ridicule the propaganda of “officials serving the people.”

The mockery of the “master-servant” relationship between the people and government officials is further illustrated in C21 and C22 through irony, or “speaking truth the opposite way” (正话反说/ *zhenghua fanshuo*). Both commenters seemingly showed their sympathy toward corrupt officials like Zhou (e.g., “bursting into tears” and “so touching”) and their alignment with government propaganda (i.e. Chinese officials are wholeheartedly devoted to serving the people), but they strategically twisted the official meaning of “serving the people” by tying it to government officials’ corrupt conduct of consuming expensive cigarettes rather than the normative conduct indicated by this slogan, that is, “serving for the people’s interests.” These two commenters ironically frame Zhou’s corruption as a sacrifice for the interests of the people simply because his corruption “contributed to the overall domestic consumption in China.”

“Serving the people” can be seen as a normative categorical feature pertaining to both “the people” and “government officials” categories (a relational pair) that entails a “master-servant” relationship between members of these two categories, but online commenters in this case study used political satire (in the form of parody and irony) as a discursive strategy to reject this close tie between the people and government officials by mocking the authenticity of this relationship and reconfiguring this categorical feature of “serving the people” and the

relationship it entails in China's political discourse. It is no longer about "officials wholeheartedly devoted to serving people's interests" but rather "officials are corrupt on behalf of the people." Drawing upon scholars' observation of membership categorization as a normative moral enterprise (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2009; Jayysui, 1984), we can argue that online commenters performed their moral critique of corrupt officials like Zhou (as well as the government) from a standpoint of "the people" through a playful and ironic parody of political slogans and government formulations. Through online political satire, they were able to activate a communal membership category among the Chinese people to collectively poke fun at official ideology concerning "the people" and its relationship with the government/officials.

Data Examples 4.6

C20 纪检莫相关部门（开会发言）：这次小周的事你们一定要吸取教训，以后贪污不要做的这么明显，一定要低调，不要让我们难做，不然我们工作很难办。一定坚持 xxx 主义，xxx 思想，狠抓 x 个代表，稳定好群众思想。努力做到贪的人民心服，忽悠的人民口服。

The meeting statement from the Discipline Inspection Commission's related department: you must learn from Zhou's incident, in the future, don't make it so obvious when you are corrupt, you must stay low key and don't make it difficult for us; otherwise it will be very hard for us to do our job. You must adhere to xxx-ism, xxx thought, pay close attention to x-representative, and stabilize the masses. Even if you are corrupt, try your best to win people's heart and fool them around.

C21 哎，苗主席也抽特供烟啊 如今改革开放，人民生活水平提高，公仆抽好点，是应该的，主人我眼泪哗哗的，公仆可要保重呀，国是操劳

Ah, Chairman Miao (Mao) also consumed specially supplied cigarette! Nowadays because of the Open-Up Reform, people's living condition has greatly improved, thus they as people's servants are entitled to smoke expensive cigarettes; I, the master, burst into tears. Public servants, take care, since you're all working so hard for the nation.

C22 香烟广告只能这样了 他们身体为代价，太感人了。名副其实为人民服务
Advertisement for cigarette can do no more than this, they put their own body at risk, so touching. This is really how officials live up to "serving the people."

The category of “the people” was sometimes used interchangeably with “common folk” by the online commenters (See C15-17 in Data Examples 4.4), but they did treat this category as distinctively different from “netizen” and “shitizen” in terms of the “normative conduct” associated with members of each category. Online commenters acknowledged the collective power of “the people” (particularly focusing on their participation in the anti-corruption campaign in Chinese society) and many of them believed that the success of this campaign was dependent on the Internet, Chinese netizens’ online exposure of corrupt officials, attracting public attention to these scandals, and rallying members of “the people” together. The commenter in C23 (Data Examples 4.7) depicted a vivid picture of how Chinese netizens can fight for “the people” concerning the problem of government corruption. “Netizen” here is framed as a relatively specific category of people (including experts and elites from all walks of life) who are at the forefront of this people’s war against corruption in China. Their online (and offline) actions such as “human flesh search,” as the commenter proclaimed in C23, constitutes the essence of this war on behalf of the “people.” This affirmative view of Chinese netizens was reiterated in C24 where the commenter explicitly proclaimed the importance (and the glory) of “netizens” by replacing the famous Chinese political slogan “Long Live the People” (for its political meaning, please refer to the discussion of “the people/*renmin*” in Chapter 3) with “Long Live the Netizens.” This replacement not only suggested a common ground shared by the “people” and “netizens”, but also depicted the netizens as more capable than “the people” when it comes to anti-corruption.

Data Examples 4.7

C23 天下不是某个人的天下，是天下人的天下！！！！中国也不是某些人的中国，是中国人民的中国！！！！如果我们自己不抗争，迟早要当汉奸的 WGN。中国的网友中有我们各行各业的专家和精英，人肉搜索就是我们强大的武器，涯叔就是战斗的阵地，拿起手中的”武器“：相机，手机，”爱疯死“，将一切贪官的腐败行为，丑陋嘴脸，非法家庭财产，统统曝光，让他们无所遁形。响应党和政府以及中纪委的号召，打一场轰轰烈烈，浩浩荡荡的反腐反贪的人民战争。

The world (*tianxia*) does not belong to any individual but to the entire people!!!! Similarly, China is not someone's China but the Chinese people's!!!! If we don't fight, sooner or later we would become slaves of traitors to China. There are experts and elites of all walks of life among Chinese netizens, "human flesh search" (*renrou sousuo*) is our most powerful weapon, and the *Tianya* forum is our battlefield. Take up the "weapon" in our hand: camera, mobile phone, and iPhone 4 ("love-crazy-dead") to expose to the public every official's corruption, filthiness, and illegal family property. Expose everything and let them have no place to hide. We actively respond to the call of the Party, the government and the Central Discipline Committee to start a vital and large-scale war of the people against corruption.

C24 今年国庆，涛涛同学不是说了，中国人民万岁，我要高喊，中国网友万岁
Taotao comrade (an online nickname for President Hu Jintao) said at this year's National Day, Long Live the people of China, but I wanted to shout out, Long Live the Netizen of China.

Despite this shared common ground, online commenters drew a clear distinction between "the people" and "netizens" concerning the kind of members fitting into each category. The "people" is predominantly perceived as innocent, kind, and morally superior by online commenters, while the "netizen" is sometimes portrayed as radical "internet mobs" (网络暴民 / *wangluo baomin*) in Chinese society. (It is important to note here that the category of "netizen" is heavily contested in the Chinese context and there're at least two different views on who are China's netizens. This contested nature of the "netizens" category will be explained later in this section). For example, one blogger articulated in his post a different reading of Chinese netizens' involvement in the Zhou Jiugeng event, arguing that Zhou was targeted in the online "human flesh search" because he displeased netizens by what he said in public and that the whole event

was some tobacco company's conspiracy to promote their expensive cigarettes. In response to this rather peculiar argument, many online commenters labeled the blogger a "fifty-cent" for attempting to divert netizens' attention from Zhou's corruption to China's tobacco industry. More interestingly, they challenged this blogger's assumption that the online exposure of Zhou's corruption was a result of him displeasing the Chinese netizens. As shown in C25 and C26, online commenters contended that Zhou (and corrupt Chinese officials in general) offended "the kind people" (and "common folks"), but not "netizens". So what does this distinction tell us about the defining characteristics of these membership categories?

Data Examples 4.8

C25 他们不是得罪了网友，而是得罪了善良的人民！！

It's not that they (corrupt officials) offended netizens, but offended the kind people!!

C26 cao,楼主的文采真强，成功地转移了网友的视线。不过还是要说一句，周就更是得罪网民了么？不是，他是得罪了老百姓。

Fuck, *lou zhu*'s (the blogger's) writing sparkles, successfully shifted netizens' attention. Nevertheless, I still want to say, did Zhou Jiugeng displease netizens? No, he displeased the common people.

Online commenters recognized that members of "the people" and "netizens" formed a united front through which Chinese netizens played a leading (and crucial) role in China's online anti-corruption; nevertheless, many of these commenters commented on the people (and common folks) as innocent and morally superior to the "netizens" who have often been negatively portrayed radical "internet mobs" and who were likely to get offended about almost everything. As online commenters indicated in Data Examples 4.6, offending "the people" (or the common folks) seemed more severe and unforgivable than doing that to "netizens." This comparison and contrast illustrates the moral superiority of the "kind people" and the political

power of this membership category in light of its significance in China's political discourse in the 20th century, particularly relating to Mao's sanctification of "the people" as "master of the nation." (See Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion on this political term).

The supremacy of "the people" is well demonstrated through online commenters' calls for sanctions against Zhou (and other corrupt officials alike) for their "anti-people" remarks (See C27 below). Not only did commenters state that it was not appropriate for officials to be "anti-people" (if so they would be punished), but also asserted that anyone (including officials) not aligning with "the people" should be regarded as "the enemy." This "people's enemy" rhetoric of the Mao era was brought back by online commenters (for example, in C28) for the purpose of initiating a public moral (and political) campaign against corrupt officials. Interestingly, in C29, the commenter invoked a prevalent Buddhist-philosophical saying in Chinese culture – "vice will have an evil recompense" – to forecast the ultimate falling of corrupt officials and meanwhile to indicate that "the people" are naturally positioned on the right side of this battle (because of their moral goodness).

Data Examples 4.9

C27 一定要顶！不要以为自己就是牛逼，别人都是傻逼，说出反人民反社会的话就要受到惩罚！

(We) must top this post! Don't assume yourself as the greatest and smartest while asserting that others are all dummies. Whoever said things that are anti-people or anti-society will be punished!

C28 南京江宁区房产局局长周久耕公然与人民为敌！

Director of the Housing Department at Nanjing's Jiangning District–Zhou Jiugeng, has openly made himself an enemy of the people!

C29 恶有恶报，与人民为敌没有好下场，大快人心。

Vice will have an evil recompense; enemy of "the people" will not have a good end. This (Zhou's detention) is very satisfactory.

In addition to the emphasis on the moral superiority of the masses, online commenters continued to hammer at the supremacy of “the people” in China’s online anti-corruption campaign and make it a distinctive feature of this category. In Data Examples 4.10, the commenter in C30 asked online participants to partake in the campaign as a member of “the people,” not “netizen” or “shitizen.” Here online participation was considered an obligation (or even a mission) of the people to undertake because of the important role they play in China’s political system. In contrast, C31 and C32 were more likely addressed to Chinese netizens lurking in the discussion forum, asking them not to fail people’s expectations and to take actions (i.e., topping posts online) along with the people in response to their “touching voices.” No matter whether this concrete online action of “topping a post” was associated with “the people” or “netizens,” “the people” was positioned as a distinctive category with a moral power appealing to the online community (to participate in this collective action of “online topping”).

Data Examples 4.10

C30 一定要顶。作为一个人民
As a member of people, I must bump (this post).

C31 不顶对不起人民群众
Not bumping this (post) will let the people and the masses down.

C32 顶吧，该你了！——献给正在此帖下潜水的网友们：亲爱的网友，你好。此刻，你正在与千百万同类一起浏览该贴。怎么样，感觉如何？是不是有一种悲怆酸涩的暖意在心中流动？是的。源自人民心中最深处的声音，总是有种让人感动的力量。“Bump the post, it’s your turn!” Dedicate the message below to all the lurking netizens under this post: “Dear netizens, how are you? Right now, you are reading this post along with millions of your fellows. How do you feel? Isn’t there a flow of warmth with sadness and acerbity running through your heart? Yes no doubt. The deepest voice from people’s hearts is always so touching.”

Despite the supremacy of “the people” in China’s political culture, some online commenters argued that members of “the people” could be easily turned into “shitizens” in China’s single-party rule. In Data Examples 4.11, the commenter in C33 distinguished the two categories (“the people” and “shitizens”) in terms of their participatory role in China’s political system, that is, members of “the people” (as “masters of the nation”) were responsible for keeping the government under surveillance while shitizens (like the commenter himself) could do nothing apart from “witnessing” (围观/*weiguan*). Members of “the people” were categorized by online commenters as active agents who can and should supervise the government while “shitizens” were just “witnessing” due to their deep disillusion and disappointment with the ruling state. Although the communicative conduct of “witnessing” can be interpreted as a form of powerful collective action in China’s cyberspace (Tong & Lei, 2013), the commenter in C33 treats it more like a passive reaction rather than an active way of participating as suggested by the contrast between “supervising” and “witnessing.” “Supervising,” therefore is constructed (by this commenter) as a normative categorical feature (or conduct) associated “the people” (like an obligation or duty), while “witnessing” is the norm for people who see themselves as “shitizens” in Chinese society. This contrast shows that online commenters positioned members of these two categories differently within China’s political culture.

However, it is important to note, (as seen in C34 and C35), that the politically responsible and morally superior “people” could easily lose their “privilege” of being “masters of the nation” and be downgraded as “shitizens.” In general, online commenters expressed their deep faith in the collective power of “the people” on the one hand while on the other hand they were well aware of the danger of being treated as “shitizens” by the government (and officials) and thus losing their opportunity and freedom to supervise and participate.

Data Examples 4.11

C33 人民去监督。我是p民，观望。

It is the people who're keeping the government under surveillance. I am a shitizen, so I watch.

C34 没有民主人民永远是个屁

Without democracy, the people (of China) is always just a fart.

→C35 赞! 就是这样的"

Thumb up! It's exactly like what you said.

To sum up, “the people” category was first made relevant to the current discussion through online commenters’ questioning and mocking of “serving the people”, a categorical feature that is normatively associated with another category “officials” in this relational pair of categories. Online commenters employed “the people” category not only to challenge the official ideology of a “master-servant” relationship as entailed in the political slogan of “serving the people,” but also to perform a moral critique of corrupt officials like Zhou and the Chinese government. In this sense, members of “the people” (similar to “common folks”) are considered as a legitimate source of power to hold government officials accountable, despite the fact that this moral power has been so far ineffective in curbing official corruption in China. Nevertheless, online commenters did talk about “the people” as if they were morally and political superior to members of the other two categories: “netizens” and “shitizens.” All these three categories are distinguished by online commenters through tying them to their normative conduct respectively, namely, the people supervising the government, netizens topping posts online, and shitizens witnessing. It is important to note, however, online commenters are very well aware of the Chinese political context in which “the people” could lose their “supremacy” and thus be treated the same as members of “shitizen.”

4.3 Netizen/*Wangmin*/网民

Based on previous discussions in this chapter (see Data Examples 4.8 for example), we may have noted some negative connotations associated with the category of “netizen” in Chinese public discourse in that members of this category were oftentimes labeled as “internet mobs” by online commenters. However, a closer examination revealed that the categorization of netizens in the Chinese context was not overwhelmingly negative, but was suffused with contestations on the defining features of who are netizens and what they are capable of when it comes to social change in China.

First of all, online commenters revealed the contested nature of “netizens” in the Chinese cyberspace: Are they a group of righteous, well-educated, critical thinkers or just ‘internet mobs’ who are radical, emotional, and uneducated? Two radically different types of netizens emerged out of this online contestation. As shown in C36, the commenter created a divide within the “netizen” category by making a clear distinction between two types, the “rational netizens” and the “internet mobs.” The commenter clearly identified with the first type by addressing them as “friends” while the latter was compared with radical and mob-like “red guards” during Cultural Revolution – a socio-politically and culturally disastrous ten years (1966-1976) in China’s modern history. By invoking this historical memory of “red guards,” the commenter in C36 constructed a powerful image of a sub-category of netizens as “mobs” (*baomin*).

Data Examples 4.12

C36 理智的网民朋友们，这是典型的因言论而获罪阿！因善意的言论，而得罪了其道德观与其相违背网络暴民，而遭到网络暴民非法无情的报复！不仅是周久耕同志，从铜须门在到前段时间目无法纪的暴民们发动的“百度圣战”，将大量他人隐私泄漏于网络，如同 30 年前红卫兵满大街的张贴大字报！在让所有的暴民对当事人进行围攻，精神折磨，一直把当事人逼到精神崩溃，想到自杀。所谓的网民的网络舆论监督简直成了暴民们散发自己对社会不满的发泄口！这简直就是活脱脱的文革重现！

Rational netizens and friends, this is what was typically called “being punished for your words!” Because his kind words were contradicted by what the internet mob believe, Zhou suffered from relentless and illegal revenges from the internet mob! Not only the Zhou Jiugeng comrade, from the “Tongxu Gate” to the illegal “Baidu Jihad,” these people leak out others’ privacy to the internet, just like the red guards putting up the big-character posters all over the streets during cultural revolution 30 years ago! Let all the mob attack the person involved; torture them till they are on the edge of committing suicide. The so-called “internet surveillance” by netizens is actually a channel for the mob to vent out their discontent with the society! This is exactly like Cultural Revolution coming to life again!

C37 网络暴民，自认为具有“极高”的道德水准，还有无比的正义感，使命感，高举着中华人民共和国法律的大旗。实际上却对社会 对事件没有丝毫的认知力，可以说基本都是人云亦云的脑残低能儿。

Internet mobs who think themselves possessing “extremely high” moral standards and incomparable senses of justice and mission are holding high the banner of the law of People’s Republic of China. However, in fact, they barely have any understanding about the present society and social issues, so basically they are a bunch of retarded who just say what everybody says.

→C38 将大多数网民定义为暴民，足可力证楼主滴脑残低能儿。

Defining the majority of netizens as mobs, which convincingly demonstrated the mental retardation of the author of this post (louzhu).

C39 网民一般都是半文盲或大老粗，文章意思稍微转个弯，就根本看不懂了。其实我根本不是那个意思。如果只是网络起哄，而不是建立起合理的监督机制，贪官永远反不完，网民只是被人利用的工具而已。

Netizens are generally semiliterate or un-educated; if the post they’re reading is a bit complex, it became utterly incomprehensible to them. In fact this is not what I really meant. (What I was trying to say was that) If we are only interested in heckling on the Internet but not establishing a reasonable surveillance mechanism, then anti-corruption will never end and netizens will just end up with being taken advantaged like a tool.

→C40 你是哪个意思啊 你那点小意思谁看不出来啊 还故作艰深状 拐弯抹角还不是为了夸自己深沉 都看懂了 不要老强调了 另外 你给网民下的结论太武断点了吧 看你写的东西 无论从哪个角度 也不细嘛

Then what do you really mean? Everyone can see through what you were thinking. Pretending to be sophisticated and beat around the bush, aren't you just trying to promote yourself as (a) profound (thinker)? We all understand, so stop emphasizing that. Also, isn't your concluding remark about netizens too assertive? Look at what you wrote, no matter from what perspective, it is not refined at all.

→ C41 尊重网民吧，没文化或大老粗。还是很多人看懂了吧。

Please respect netizens, no literacy or education? But still many of them understand what is said.

This “mob-like” feature of netizens is also illustrated in C37 and C39 in which online commenters portrayed netizens as “retarded,” “superficial,” “illiterate,” and over-estimating their morality and capability in comparison with other categories. This negative portrayal of netizens, however, was challenged by other online commenters (see C38, C40, and C41). They contended that this “netizens-as-mobs” view was not only inaccurate (for regarding the majority of netizens as mobs) but also insulting (for under-estimating netizens’ comprehensive ability); thus they called for more respect to netizens and their ability to deliberate on current social and political issues (such as corruption) in contemporary Chinese society. In alignment with this contention, online commenters also commented on the “good” nature of netizens as being “kind” and “righteous” (see C42), as well as their ability to think and participate in public deliberation in China (see C43). Very interestingly, the commenter in C43 drew a distinction among three membership categories in contemporary Chinese society (*pingmin*-commoners²⁷, *pimin*-shitizens, and *wangmin*-netizens) and through this comparison the commenter highlighted the “superiority”

²⁷ The Chinese expression of 平民/*pingmin* is most similar to the category of “common folk” we discussed in this case study.

of netizens as a particular group of people in Chinese society who have the knowledge and ability to think and deliberate critically. As a result, it would be harder for the “aristocrats” in China (such as government officials) to deceive the people (especially netizens) and get away with corruption. These opposing voices at the “mob-like” feature of “netizens” suggested that there was another sub-category of netizens who are rational and critical thinkers playing an important role in supervising government officials.

Data Examples 4.13

C42 网民是善良滴，网民是正义滴！
Netizens are kind, netizens are righteous.

C43 贵族们啊，你们奢侈的时候，请不要让平民（屁民）们看到！尤其是平民（屁民）中的网民们，这些人都有文化，都会用脑子思考问题的
Aristocrats (officials), when you are being luxury, please do not let the commonners (shitizens) spot it! In particular the netizens among commoners (shitizens), because they are all educated and can think.

The contestation of what features constitutes a “real” netizen (as shown in Data Examples 4.11 and 4.12) appeared as a salient discursive pattern in online comments surrounding the “Zhou Jiugeng” event. Two sub-categories of “netizens” emerged out of this contestation, namely, “netizens as mobs” and “netizens as rational thinkers.” It is not uncommon to see these two subcategories in tension with each other when online commenters attempted to align themselves with the one group of netizens (as rational thinkers) while at the same time to demonize the other group as mobs. In other words, the category of “netizens” was contentious in nature and not as homogenous as previous research on Chinese netizens has assumed²⁸. More

²⁸ In the current literature on Chinese Internet Studies, especially within discussions about the political impact of the Internet on Chinese society, many studies make this assumption about this

importantly, online commenters created this divide of two types of netizens among themselves and strategically played one against another in order not only to construct their own identity (as “rational netizens”) but also to propagate their own political opinions in cyberspace.

The contested nature of “netizen” was also revealed in online discussions concerning the efficacy of netizens combating corruption and creating social change. There were heated debates on whether the removal of Zhou Jiugeng from his official post symbolized a victory for Chinese netizens, and whether it was right to rely on netizens and the Internet (in particular the “human flesh search” online) to curb Chinese officials’ corruption. After the announcement of Zhou’s removal from his official post, many online commenters acclaimed the success of netizens in combating corrupt officials in China by referring to the power of netizens’ collective actions online (in particular their participation in “human flesh search”) and urged all netizens to make a sustained effort in the online anti-corruption campaign (see Data Examples 4.14).

Data Examples 4.14

C44 有网民针对此事表示, “人肉搜索”比“最牛房产局长”还牛。

Some netizens commented on Zhou’s event, noting “human flesh search” is more amazing than the “most powerful Housing Director (Zhou Jiugeng).”

→C45 网友们: 再接再厉!

Netizens: Keep up the good work!

→C46 嘎嘎嘎。网友的力量是无穷的。

Gagaga, the power of netizens knows no boundary.

Despite this overwhelmingly optimistic view of Chinese netizens’ role in curbing corrupt officials in contemporary Chinese society (such as in the Zhou Jiugeng case), some online

homogeneous group of Internet users (as netizens) as the main player in online collective actions without paying attention to the dynamics within this broad group of “Chinese netizens.”

commenters presented a rather critical interpretation of Chinese netizens' involvement in Zhou's case and the anti-corruption movement in general. For instance, in response to the celebration of netizens' "human flesh search" in anti-corruption in C44, the commenter in C47 (Data Examples 4.13) explicitly called this online collective action against corruption "a tragedy" in addition to acknowledging its progressiveness. On a similar note, the commenter in C48 expressed a mixed (and somewhat confused) feeling toward how to make sense of netizens' involvement in Zhou's case by providing two contradictory interpretations: "a victory for netizens" vs. "a tragedy for China's legal system." Unlike the commenters in Data Examples 4.14, these two commenters were more cautious about over-evaluating the "the power of netizens" in the Zhou Jiugeng case and the anti-corruption campaign within Chinese society. Although they recognized that netizens' online collective actions (such as "human flesh search") were conducive to the exposure of corrupt officials, they put more emphasis on the limitations of netizens' online actions within China's legal system and institutions (e.g., the Discipline Committee in C49), which basically failed to do their job of keeping government officials under surveillance. These online commenters, they were more concerned with a failing legal system within Chinese society, which was arguably perpetuating corruption in the government; thus, they attempted to interpret the efficacy of netizens' online efforts against corruption within the larger context of China's legal system and institutions.

Data Examples 4.15

C47 靠人肉来反腐，是进步也是悲哀。

Relying on "human flesh search" (*renrou sousuo*) to crack down on corruption, this is progressive and tragic as well.

C48 真不知道是网民的又一次胜利还是法制的悲哀!

Really don't know whether this is another victory for netizens or just another tragedy for China's legal system.

C49 中国的网民真的好累，本来是上网找乐的，却干起了纪委的活

China's netizens are really exhausted. They came online to have fun but ended up with doing what the Discipline Committee should be doing.

Based on our analysis in this section, we can see that online commenters constructed two types (or sub-categories) of netizens (“internet mobs” vs. “rational thinkers”) in their interactions with one another. These two sub-categories were in tension with each other when online commenters attempted to align themselves with the “rational thinker” type of netizens while at the same time demonize others as mob-like netizens. In addition, online commenters presented two contradictory interpretations regarding the efficacy of netizens in anti-corruption through categorizing netizens as either “powerful players” or “pathetic puppets” taken advantage by the government. The discussion around “netizen” suggests that this category itself is very heterogeneous and has a much more contested nature than we might expect.

4.4 Shitizen/*Pimin*/屁民

“Shitizen” is closely related to two other membership categories (“netizen” and “the people”) we discussed previously in this chapter. Based on our discussion, we see that online commenters treated these three categories as distinctly different (despite of their connections) in terms of the “normative conduct” related to members’ (online) political participation and the responsibilities that members of each category were expected to fulfill. For instance, although

netizens were typically considered a part of the shitizens in China (see C50), they were portrayed as “well-educated, critical thinkers” who were more capable than shitizens (see C51). In contrast, shitizens were not expected to supervise the government but just to “witness” and “top others’ posts” online. Online commenters not only openly claimed their membership of the “shitizen” (as shown in C52, C53, C54 and C55), but also made specific references to the “normative conduct” associated with this category, that is, “witnessing” and “topping posts.” These social (and collective) actions were oftentimes framed as the “only task” that shitizens were able to accomplish; moreover, as the commenter in C55 indicated, claiming this “shitizen” identity itself conveys the commenter’s stance toward (online) political participation in the Chinese context.

Data Example 4.16

C50 同志们不要忘了，网民是中国的 P 民的一部分！说中国 P 民胜利,那还是一个遥远的目标。

Comrades, don’t forget that netizens are actually a part of the shitizens (P min)! It is still unreachable for shitizens in China to think about this (Zhou Jiugeng being discharged from his post) as a victory for them.

C51/C43 贵族们啊，你们奢侈的时候，请不要让平民（屁民）们看到！尤其是平民（屁民中的网民们，这些人都有文化，都会用脑子思考问题的²⁹

Aristocrats (officials), when you are being luxury, please do not let the commonners (shitizens) spot it! In particular the netizens among commoners (shitizens), because they are all educated and can think.

C52 人民去监督。我是 p 民，观望。

It is the people who’re keeping the government under surveillance. I am a shitizen, so I watch (wait and see?).

²⁹ This comment has been included in an early section of this chapter, referred to as C43 in page 89 within this document.

C53 我等 P 民不会干别的，就知道顶！
Shitizens like us can do nothing but top (others') posts!

C54 顶一下此贴是我等 p 民不可推卸的责任。
Top this post is the unshakable duty of shitizens like us.

C55 顶一下！我是 P 民我打酱油！
Top it! I am a shitizen and I am just *buying soy sauce*³⁰ (passing by)!

In addition to the construction of “passive shitizens”, online commenters engaged in a heated discussion about how “shitizens” came into being in the Chinese context. Being a shitizen was generally regarded an unfortunate result for many a Chinese. Some commenters attributed it to China’s undesirable political context in which corruption and despotism were prevalent while others attributed it to Chinese people’s weak (and passive) character and their incompetence in face of the government’s corruption and power abuse. For example, the commenter in C56 provided a vivid account for “what makes you a shitizen” by digging into issues around corruption within the government (such as Zhou Jiugeng), despotism, and abuse of power. As this commenter indicated in the comment, this unfortunate political environment produced this “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1977) among the people in China as members of “shitizen” (rather than “citizen”). Shifting the focus from the general political environment to personal qualities, the commenter in C57 portrayed “shitizens” as not hard-working, not rich, unintelligent, uncourageous, and weak people; and it was because of their weak qualities that they became

³⁰ The Chinese expression “打酱油/da jiangyou” (literally translated as “buying soy sauce”) became a popular network buzzword on the Chinese internet in 2008. It was originated from a resident in Guangzhou when he was stopped on the street by a reporter from the local TV station, asking how he thought about the recent Chinese celebrities’ sex-photo scandal. The resident replied, “it’s none of my business and I am just coming out to buy soy sauce.” Immediately, this expression of “buying soy sauce” went viral on the Chinese net and people used it to communicate their “non-participatory and/or indifferent” stance toward social issues.

shitizens in society. This rather negative (and provocative) portrayal of “shitizen” was unsurprisingly challenged by another commenter in C58; nevertheless, some online commenters (such as in C59 and C60) agreed with this negative and passive portrayal of shitizens and believed that it was because of their passive and non-participatory qualities that they turned themselves into shitizens rather than “citizens” or “netizens”. Shitizens were called “cold-blooded” (in C60) and their online actions (e.g. posting online) were framed as “complaints” but not “real actions.” According to these online commenters, if people in China are not brave enough to “take up their weapons” and take real actions, then they just made themselves shitizens despite their online participation.

Data Examples 4.17

C56. 丫什么叫屁民 屁民就是 你一家子几十年的积蓄买套房不够区房管局长抽烟的 他还得跟你说 房价必须涨 涨价是为你好 为你着想 不准有反对意见的 不然让警察抓你 什么是屁民 这就是屁民

What do you think is a shitizen? You're a shitizen when your family saved for several decades in order to buy an apartment, but that amount of money you saved is barely enough to cover the cost of this housing director's cigarettes. He (the director) then told you that the housing price must go up for your benefit, so you must not hold any opposing opinions, otherwise, he would let the police arrest you. What is a shitizen like? This is what a shitizen is like.

C57 屁民之所以为屁民，第一赚钱吃不了苦移民没实力；第二入党党不要做官没智商；第三只会缩头没火气，家伙没拿手就抖。正所谓：兔子急了都咬人，屁民疯了只打字。

The reasons for why shitizens are called shitizens are, first they aren't able to work hard enough to make money nor are they rich enough to immigrate; second, the Communist Party doesn't accept their party member applications and they are not intelligent enough to work in official posts; third, they can only retreat from the frontline and they start shivering before they even picked up the weapon. It's exactly like that saying, “rabbits would even beat when they feel threatened, but shitizens are just typing (or posting) online when they're driven crazy.”

→C58 你这人咋这么不要脸呢?
Why are you so shameless?

→ C59 全都是等着别人送命，自己坐在地上张大嘴巴等着看天上落坨屎到自己嘴里坐享其成的主儿，敢操家伙能牛吗？我看除了在这里嚷嚷两声打几个字的能耐，永远都是个屁！屁民并不是别人造，而是由屁民自己造就

Everyone is waiting for others to go fight and die, while they themselves sit on the ground, open their mouth and wait to embrace the final victory, can they pick up the weapon and fight? I think besides sitting here complaining and typing a few words online, they are just like shit forever. Shitizens are not made by others, but what they made of themselves.

C60 大家都知道抱怨现实，可想想自己有为改变这一切做过点什么吗？

现在还有多少人会为我们的国家而走上街头？为我们的民众而呐喊奔走？自由、公正和民主从来不是天上掉下来的！想起来真是愧对五四先辈！冷血的 P 民们，没有行动，还是停止抱怨！

Everyone knows how to complain about the reality, but looking back have you ever done anything to change the reality? Now how many people would walk on the street to fight for our nation, to cry out for our people? Freedom, justice, and democracy will never simply fall down from the sky! Speaking of this, we really feel ashamed in comparison with our ancestors during the May Fourth movement in 1919! Cold-blooded shitizens, if not taking actions, stop complaining!

However, it is notable that some self-identified shitizens challenged this rather passive and even demeaning image of shitizens and contested the idea that shitizens can do nothing but topping others' posts online (as suggested by other online commenters). As shown in the data Examples below, all the three commenters expressed their strong determination to participate (especially in cyberspace) in China's political life. All of them seemed to be very aware of China's disappointing political environment (i.e. in which officials could easily call civilians "like a fart") (see C61) and the limitations of their political action in changing the status quo (see C62 and C63); nevertheless, they refuted the claim that shitizens' passive and non-participatory qualities made themselves shitizens (refer to Data Examples 4.17) by voicing their determination in (online) participation and their resistance to the powerful and corrupt officials in Chinese

society. These commenters argued that shitizens should not take this categorization (of themselves) for granted, should not belittle themselves and their seemingly trivial (online) participation as the commenters in Data Examples 4.17 did. Instead, they intended to re-frame their (online) political action from the standpoint of a “shitizen” in the hope of contributing to a change of the status quo in the future.

Data Examples 4.18

C61 不能因为“林大人”一句“你们算个屁”,我们就心甘情愿的做“屁民”!
We cannot simply be willing to be a “shitizen” just because “Lord Lin” said “you are like a fart!”

C62 明知只是个屁民,我也要顶;明知这只是冰山一角,我要参与。
I must also top this, even though I am just a shitizen; I must participate even though I know very well this (my participation) is just a tip of the iceberg.

C63 靠,老子的房子就这样被这些贪猪们一平方一平方烧掉哇,虽然是屁民,只要有可以放屁的地方,我还是要放个屁!
Fuck, my house was just burnt into ash in this way by these greedy pigs (officials), although a shitizen, I still want to make a fart as long as there's a place to do so.

As we analyzed in this section, the category of “shitizen” (same as “ netizen”) was also heatedly contested concerning China’s political condition in which people are made into “shitizens and the normative conduct of shitizens (i.e. “passive and non-participatory” or “determined to participate even as a shitizen”). Online commenters were very open about identifying themselves as a member of “shitizens” and this self-identification seemed to be very strategic rather than merely inventing a social address term for themselves. The category of “shitizen” was typically invoked when commenters tended to 1) express their desperation toward the “unreasonable” and “ridiculous” Chinese reality in relation to government corruption, disenfranchisement, economic and political inequality, etc.; and 2) reflect on their ability to

“rectify” the Chinese system. In addition to the contestations we captured in this section, online commenters clearly aligned themselves with this popular “structure of feeling” associated with the category of “shitizen” in Chinese society; and more importantly, they engaged in the communicative process of re-conceiving and negotiating their membership-based identities and their political actions from a shitizen’s standpoint.

4.5 Citizen/*Gongmin*/公民

The most salient categorical feature associated with “citizen” (*gongmin*) was concerned with how citizens in China could exercise their rights (in particular their right of supervising the government) within the current political system. On the one hand, online commenters remarked on the dismal political environment in China and its restrictions on citizens’ exertion of political actions; while on the other hand they applauded the affordances of the Internet as a powerful platform for them to exercise their rights. In the following Data Examples 4.19, commenters in C64, C65, and C66 all implied in their comments that the “normative conduct” of citizens in China was to supervise the government. This act of supervising (监督/*jiandu*) – which is regarded as the “obligation” and “norm” of being an ordinary citizen (C65 and C66) – was premised on the affordances of the Internet in Chinese society. The exposure of Zhou’s corruption in the cyberspace was considered by the commenter in C64 a classic examples of citizens exercising their right of supervising the government, and commenters in C65 and C66 referred to their participation in discussion forums (e.g., *Tianya*) online as the only means by which they exercise their rights and fulfill their obligations as “citizens.”

Data Example 4.19

C64 本案是不是应该作为公民监督 ZF 的一个经典案例呢?

Shouldn't we consider this case (Zhou's case) a classic example of citizens supervising the government?

C65 第一次行使了一个普通公民的举报义务....

For the very first time I, as an ordinary citizen, fulfilled my obligation of reporting on a corrupt official.

C66 面对这个社会，我也只有在天涯，才能找到作为一个公民的准则

In face of this society, only in *Tianya* (a BBS forum) can I find the norm of being a citizen.

Unlike this affirmative tone indicated in the online comments above, some commenters expressed their deep concern and frustration about citizens' political status in Chinese society. In C67, the commenter marked the "unreasonableness" of being a Chinese citizen who can do nothing but topping posts online by being "speechless" (无语/*wuyu*). The implication was that citizens with their entitled political rights should be provided adequate means to supervise the government but in reality what they could do was merely topping posts online. This deep sorrow and complex emotions were communicated through the commenter's "speechless" response to Chinese government's corruption. Similarly, the commenter in C68 also described citizens as "having no power, no money, no status," as such, the only alternative for them (citizens) to act against corruption was to rely on their collective action online. In this sense, "topping posts online" becomes a "reasonable conduct" associated with members of the "citizen" since they do not have access to necessary channels of supervision nor have power or status. Following this kind of reasoning, another commenter in C69 refused the category of "citizen" but rather used "petty common folks" to identify himself and other people like him. This deliberate selection of membership category allowed the commenter not only to convey its concern about China'

political environment in which people were not treated as citizens with their entitled rights but as powerless common folks who were positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy, but also to implicate the higher expectations of “citizens” (in comparison to “common folks”) with respect to their active participation in Chinese political life. In other words, the act of claiming a “citizen” membership typically accompanies with a higher level of political (rights) awareness and participation. Commenters in Data Examples 4.20 all alluded to the undesirable reality in China where their citizen status (as an individual entitled with political, legal, civil, and economic rights) was denied or restrained. Moreover, as we noted in the history of the concept of “citizen” (*gongmin*) in Chapter 3, the concept of “citizen” was problematized (as shown in C69) in the Chinese context, pointing to this gap between what citizens are supposed to accomplish (in theory) and what they are actually able to do (in reality). Online commenters were deeply aware of this gap (or contradiction): they, on the one hand, espoused the ideal citizens—members who can freely exercise their political rights—while, on the other hand, they noted the political constraints imposed on citizens and their political participation in the Chinese context. Nevertheless, online commenters seemed to embrace this unfortunate reality through their participation in collective actions (e.g., topping posts) online in order to make a change.

Data Examples 4.20

C67 无语中.....作为一个公民我能为国家做的也许只能是顶帖了。

Being speechless..... as a citizen perhaps what I can do for this country is only to top others' posts (online).

C68 当权力监督的滞后与无力当腐败的横行与露骨拿什么捍卫正义啊有良知的公民们我们没有权力没有金钱没有地位唯有用一道道微弱的呐喊汇集成呛人的洪流涤荡社会的文明

When the supervision on power became lagging and impotent and when corruption became undisguised and prevailing, by what means can we defend justice? Conscientious

citizens, we have no power, no money, nor status, thus the only way we have is to collect many a feeble scream into a choky torrent to clean the society.

C69 兄弟们 我们都是小老百姓，甚至连公民都算不上 号召下，我们没有太多能做的 让我们天天来顶这样的帖子，让大家都看看什么是公仆

Brothers, we are all petty common folks, cannot even really be called citizens. In response to this call (for anti-corruption), there's not much we can do. Let's come (online) and top posts like this one everyday and let everyone see what public servants are like.

In addition, online commenters drew interesting comparisons between “citizen” and “netizen” –the two categories of citizenship. Given the unfortunate political environment in China, “citizens” had to rely on the Internet and their online actions (i.e. topping posts) as the only channel through which they exercise their rights and supervise the government (as shown in C67 and C68). In this sense, what “citizens” were doing is very similar to what “netizens” had been doing, that is, posting and topping posts online. Following this line of thinking, “citizens” would be reduced to “netizens” since they were not actually more capable or qualified than netizens in terms of their political participation in China. However, as online commenters suggested in C70 and C71, citizens and netizens were two different categories despite the fact that both of the groups were needed in the anti-corruption campaign in this new (Internet) era. In C70, the commenter highlighted the “intelligence of netizens” and the “right of citizens to question authority” as the unanticipated driving force for anti-corruption in China’s Internet-mediated society. There may be several reasons why this commenter emphasized different traits respectively in relation to these two categories. Nonetheless, based on our previous discussion of “netizen,” it is safe to make the inference that “citizen” and “netizen” were treated as different categories, with the former deeply embedded in China’s “discourse of rights” (i.e. citizens’ right to question government officials) while the latter is primarily represented as “technologically savvy.” In other words, despite Chinese netizens’ “intelligence” of utilizing the Internet in China

to mobilize online participation (e.g., human flesh search), it has to be the “citizens” who can claim their rights and thus exercise their right to supervise the government. As the commenter in C71 indicated, netizens were not able to act like “citizens” to exercise “citizen rights” properly, not only because that they did not enjoy the right of directly participate in politics but also that they were not a united group of civil actors equipped with power and discipline that were deemed necessary for exercising the “citizen rights” properly in the Chinese context.

Data Examples 4.21

C70 不是有人说中国反腐遭遇“肠梗阻”了吗？充分用好网络平台、网民智慧，尊重每一个公民质疑，或许我们会蓦然发现——这就是奇兵，这就是尖刀，这就是新时期反腐败的新动力

Isn't there someone who said there has been an “intestinal obstruction” to China's anti-corruption movement? Take full advantage of the internet, netizens' intelligence, and respect every citizen's right to question (the government and officials), maybe we will suddenly realize that this is the ingenious army, this is the sharp knife, and this is the new driving force for anti-corruption in the new era.

C71 网友代表的是广大草根力量，离政治势力还很远，没有政治纲领，没有领袖，全凭一腔热血和社会道德以及个人的普遍观点作为准则，目前对社会还是很有贡献的，但也可能会被利用，也会做出错误的举动。从某方面讲，网友的一些行为是对目前社会一些制度或存在的情况表达不满，因为大家没有参政议政的权利，只能用这种方式来行使“公民权”或者说是发泄。

Netizens represent the power of the grassroots majority, which is still very much incommensurable with the ruling political power. They have no political agenda, no leader, and they act based on their passion, social morality, and their personal opinions. Right now they have made contributions to the society, but they can be taken advantage of and make mistakes. In some sense, some of the netizens' behaviors are expressions of dissatisfaction toward some issues within the system. Since most of us don't enjoy the right to participate in the deliberation and administration of state affairs, they can only resort to the Internet to exercise their “citizen rights” or put it another way, to vent out.

In summary, “citizen,” as an important political term and membership category, remains an unrealistic but aspirational social imagination for the Chinese. Online commenters used their

(self-) categorization of “citizens” to invoke and embrace an ideal form of citizenship rooted in Western democracy from which a contrast was made to demonstrate the unfortunate and undesirable political environment in China. Many of them noted that the political hurdles (e.g., the authoritarian government, lack of political freedom) in Chinese society had transformed what the concept of “citizen” (as well as “citizenship”) actually entailed; as such, commenters resorted to the Internet as their only means (or platform) to participate in deliberating and administering state affairs. This gap between the imagined “ideal citizenship” and Chinese citizens’ actual restrained practice of citizen rights created this perplexing discourse about the category of “citizen” in contemporary Chinese society. In addition, the discussion around “netizens-not-acting-as citizens” bears great resemblance to the discourse about the qualities of Chinese people as members of the “citizen” group in early twentieth century. Based on the discussion, we made the following two observations. First, the notion of “citizen” as a membership category remains problematic in contemporary China, not in the sense of Chinese people lacking the necessary qualities that late Qing intellectuals (e.g., Kang Youwei) articulated in the early 20th century, but rather the lack of an enabling political system and environment in China to prevent the state infringing upon people’s rights to act as citizens. Second, the underlying ideology of serving the public (*gong*) in China’s political culture is still a defining feature of “citizen” in the sense that citizens are expected to act for the sake of public good rather than obtaining individual gratification. In light of this “public” nature of citizens, online commenters pointed out that netizens’ online actions should not be considered the same as citizens exercising their rights because these actions are often motivated by their individual interests such as attracting more followers or attacking their political opponents.

4.6 The “Fifty-Cent”/*Wumao*/五毛

The “fifty-cent party” (*wumao dang*) or “fifty-cent” (*wumao*) was invoked by Chinese commenters to perform multiple online social actions that include constructing a peculiar political environment (infiltrated by the “fifty-cent”) in China, mocking on China’s political reality, soliciting and confirming a united front against corrupt officials, drawing attention to one’s post, and performing a moral critique at the potential fifty-cent. It is notable that the use of this category is essentially multifaceted and contested in the cyberspace. As we mentioned in the introduction of this membership category in Chapter 3, members’ overt expression of a supportive political stance towards the government and its policies was typically marked as a defining feature of the “fifty-cent” category; but increasingly this method of identifying “fifty-cent” became contentious in the Chinese cyberspace due to this blurred distinction between government-sponsored comments (posted by the fifty-cent) and ordinary netizens’ comments, and the growing interest of online commenters to label themselves as members of this category.

In the current case, online commenters assumed this prevailing existence of “fifty-cent” in the Chinese cyberspace without clearly defining what constitutes a “fifty-cent.” For instance, following the very first post in *Tianya* that exposed Zhou’s consumption of expensive cigarettes, online commenters generated over 2,400 comments, through which many of them expressed their anger, disappointment, and criticism of corrupt officials and the government. But more interestingly, they also conveyed a clear assumption about the presence of “fifty-cent” (as well as their favorable stance toward government officials) in the cyberspace. As shown in Data Examples 4.22, all the commenters were expecting the fifty-cent to appear and join the online

discussion. They either directly asked “where are the fifty-cent?” or simply assumed the fifty-cent were lurking and supervising all the comments online. By deliberately bringing the category of “fifty-cent” into the discussion about Zhou’s corruption, these commenters were able to construct a peculiar political reality in (online) China where the “fifty-cent” is ubiquitous and their proactive online participation and their pro-government stance became the norm. In other words, online commenters were deeply aware of the prevailing existence of the fifty-cent, noting that they were inevitable in the Chinese cyberspace. As such, they have not only acknowledged the presence of “fifty cents” on the Internet, but also incorporated it to China’s special political environment in which they found their own ways to participate in politics, oftentimes with an entertaining and/or sarcastic tone (see C74 and C75).

Data Examples 4.22

C72 五毛在哪里,快来救周局啊

Fifty-cent, where are you? Hurry up and come here to save Director Zhou!

C73 怎么五毛还没出现, 顶到五毛出现

Why aren’t the fifty-cent showing up, keep topping (this post) until the fifty-cent came.

C74 五毛的兄弟些, 赶紧回去给主子报告下。他们的下人再这么搞得出大事啦

The fifty-cent brothers, hurry up and go back to report to your master. Something serious would happen if their servants continued doing things like this (i.e. corruption).

C75 你等屁民真是见识短, 才 1500 一条的烟而已嘛, 更贵的在家里喝茶的时候抽你们都没有见呢!!!! 对了, 怎么没见到五毛呢? 都跑哪去了

You shitizens are so short-witted, this is just a package of 1500 RMB cigarette, there’re more expensive ones being consumed (by officials) at home that we haven’t seen yet!!!! Right, how come I haven’t seen any fifty-cent? Where are they?

C76 五毛来了吗? 150 元一盒的烟, 你们要发 300 贴啊! 10 万元的表, 估计你是子子孙孙都发不完了!

Have the fifty-cent showed up? To earn a carton of this cigarette, you will have to contribute 300 posts! If you want to get a watch worthy of 100,000 RMB, perhaps all your offspring generation after generation would have to keep posting.

→ C77 五毛都去向组织汇报了

All the fifty-cent have gone to report to the organization.

Additionally, all the comments in Data Examples 4.22 suggested a strong political coalition between members of the “fifty-cent” and the Chinese government/officials when commenters made the assumption that the fifty-cent were going to justify Zhou’s behavior and “save” his public image. In this sense, although these commenters did not pinpoint who was a fifty-cent, they identified members’ favorable stance toward government officials and this political coalition as a normative property of the “fifty-cent.” However, this method of identification can be more contentious when online commenters deliberately claimed this “fifty-cent” identity for themselves on the Internet. For instance, in Data Examples 4.23, commenters either directly identified themselves as a fifty-cent (in C78 and C79) or demonstrated their awareness of being identified by others as a fifty-cent (in C80) because of their distinctive view on Zhou’s case. Without actually knowing whether the *louzhu* – the original author of the post on which these commenters commented – was really a fifty-cent or not, online commenters oftentimes activated the category of fifty-cent and ascribed it to the *louzhu* based on the point of view they held or the frames they adopted to make sense of Zhou’s case. In C78, the commenter labeled the *louzhu* a fifty-cent after s/he posted on the forum arguing that what netizens did to Zhou Jiugeng was exactly a new form of cultural revolution through which Zhou’s behaviors were exaggerated (e.g., his cigarettes were actually not that expensive). Similarly, the commenter

in C79 identified the *louzhu* a fifty-cent when s/he argued in a post that the whole “Zhou Jiugeng Event” online was just a scheme of the Communist Party and that both netizens and Zhou were actually the sacrifices in this power game. Interestingly, although the original posts to which C78 and C79 responded did not provide an overt favorable stance toward Zhou or the government in general, both authors of these posts were labeled as members of the “fifty-cent.” It seemed that the categorization of “fifty-cent” was not really about identifying the “authentic” fifty-cent but rather about soliciting and confirming a “united front” among all Chinese people to combat government corruption in China. For those who did not align with this “united front” or the “common view” held by the majority of online participants, they were at the risk of being labeled as a fifty-cent. This cultural-political reasoning was most vividly demonstrated in C80. The commenter offered a different reading of Zhou’s case in the comment on a post that enthusiastically called Zhou’s case a big victory for netizens regarding their online efforts in combating corrupt officials. By implicating the possibility of Zhou being an unlucky scapegoat in China’s corrupt officialdom – a view different from the overwhelming online acclaim for netizens, the commenter expressed an awareness of potentially being labeled as a fifty-cent because of this different sense-making of Zhou’s case. Here the commenter wittily invoked the category of “fifty-cent” to strengthen his or her own argument about Zhou’s deposition instead of literally claiming the identity of a fifty-cent. Similarly, commenters in C78 and C79, although both of them claimed the identity of “fifty-cent”, they were apparently more interested in ascribing this identity to the person who authored the post than themselves.

Data Examples 4.23

C78 五毛啊五毛,终于又找到一个.楼主我顶你,俺也是五毛,大家好兄弟.

Fifty-cent ahh fifty-cent, finally (I) found another one. *Louzhu* I support you, I am also a fifty-cent, we're good brothers.

C79 楼主啊,楼主,终于找到你了,我也是五毛,大家好兄弟.真是五毛见五毛,两眼泪汪汪.小声问一句,你的钱领到手了吗?

Ahh, *Louzhu*, *louzhu* I finally found you, I am also a fifty-cent, we are all good pals. It's really like the saying described, when the fifty-cent met another fifty-cent, tears filled their eyes. Let me ask quietly, have you already got your money?

C80 天下乌鸦一般黑,他算是比较没背景的,说话直 思想简单,最先倒的,或者说当替罪羊的就是这类人了。当官的,又不腐败的吗?有,深山沟沟里的村长。呀,不小心当了一把五毛~~

All crows under the sun are black, (comparing to other corrupt officials) he doesn't have strong connections within the government, and is frank and simple-minded. Typically it is this kind of officials who became the scapegoat. Is there any official who is not corrupt? Yes, such as the village head in a rural mountain village. Ya, by accident I became a fifty-cent for once.

Based on the analysis above, we can see that online commenters invoked the fifty-cent category for the purpose of ascribing this identity to other online participants or strengthening their own argument by reinforcing its distinctiveness in comparison with the “majority view.” Moreover, because of this tendency of identifying any distinctive or unusual post as a post of the fifty-cent, this “fifty-cent” name-calling became contentious in online discussions. For instance, in response to a post that offered a different reading into Zhou's case by probing into the close tie between the tobacco industry and government corruption in China ³¹, the commenter in C81 contended that the author of this post was merely presenting the facts to inform the public of this close tie rather than taking a stance in favor of Zhou or the government. A close examination of

³¹ The idea presented in this post was that these expensive cigarettes (including the one that Zhou was associated with) were produced only for government officials in China at a high price, and thus it was not strange at all to see Chinese officials consuming these cigarettes.

the original post showed that the author (or *louzhu*) seemed just to suggest a different frame for people in China to make sense of Zhou's deposition and this frame was apparently very different from what the majority of online participants used to interpret Zhou's removal as a victory for Chinese netizens' online actions in combating corruption. So according to this commenter in C81, publishing a post with a different view from the majority did not necessarily make its author (or *louzhu*) a fifty-cent and the real fifty-cent should be more adept at disguising their identity to mislead the public. Similarly, the commenter in C82 was attempting to reason with the fellow commenters, suggesting that what the *louzhu* said in a post actually made some sense. But because of this contestation, the commenter was subject to being labeled as a fifty-cent for lacking common sense. As it can be seen in the data examples below, the identification of a "fifty-cent" in China's cyberspace is not always unproblematic nor without contestation.

Data Examples 4.24

C81 不要动不动就说人家五毛，楼主只是贴出了让大家知道而已，并没有支持的意思（楼主还说此地无银三百两了）。另外，五毛的水平应该不至于这么低。
Don't just so easily call another a "fifty-cent," *louzhu* posted this (blog) just to let everyone know about this, s/he didn't mean to support what's said here (*louzhu* also said s/he is not consciously protesting his/her innocence here). Also, (posts written by) the fifty-cent should not be so shallow.

C82 我觉得网民应该理性点，别先太早下结论。如果他的正规工资有 3000 圆以上，抽一包 150 圆的烟也不违过吧？3000 圆可以买 20 包。这个烟又不是天天抽。。你说是不是

I think netizens should be more rational, don't make their judgment too quickly. If his standard salary is above 3000 RMB (per month), then it is okay to consume cigarettes of 150RMB per carton, right? 3000 RMB could buy him 20 cartons. He is not like smoking this everyday...right?

→C83 你怎知道他只抽一包？做五毛也要有点常识。

How can you know he only smokes one carton (everyday)? Even as a fifty-cent, you need to have some commonsense.

Last but not least, members of the “fifty-cent” were frequently criticized or mocked for taking the wrong side in the current political battle between Chinese people and government officials. They became the target of many online commenters’ moral critique and mockery. As shown in Data Examples 4.25, all commenters, in one way or another, showed their contempt toward the fifty-cent for not having “a soul or conscience” or blindly following corrupt Chinese officials like a flunkey. Some of the commenters even attempted to dehumanize the fifty-cent. For example, in C86, the commenter suggested that the fifty-cent were almost “not-human-like” for not showing compassion for fellow Chinese who were suffering deeply from government officials’ corruption. Interestingly, online discussions also showed a close connection between the “fifty-cent” category and “netizens,” as well as “shitizens.” Although there is some negative portrayal of “netizens” in Chinese society, it seems that the fifty-cent were treated as a worse kind of person participating online. However, these categories are not completely unrelated. As shown in C88, the commenter noted that the fifty-cent could easily give up their membership and be transferred to the “shitizen” category. The implication here seems to be that ultimately the fifty-cent will end up being treated like shitizens by government officials, despite them sparing no effort to back up the Chinese regime and government officials.

Data Examples 4.25

C84 cnm, 以为所有的网民都想你们一样脑残呀, 赶快拿到 5 毛去买脑残片
CNM (fuck your mother), don’t assume all the netizens are as dumb as you all, quickly get your fifty-cent and buy some dumb pills.

C85 很难得在天涯顶贴, 我顶楼主, 希望你别为了五毛钱把自己的灵魂出卖了。
Rarely come to Tianya and top a post, (so) I support the louzhu (original author of this post), in the hope that you didn’t betray your soul for fifty cents.

C86 房子是压在草民身上的大山！看这些贪官手握大权，什么时候看过一眼草民？！谁人不愤怒！除了 5 毛

Housing is like a big mountain pressing on the grassroots! Look at these corrupt officials, so powerful, when did they ever lay their eyes on the grassroots (their life)? ! No one would not be outraged! Except the fifty-cent.

C87 五毛也应该有良心

The fifty-cent should also have conscience.

C88 五毛们都下岗了，奴才不好当啊，甚至个别的都开始做 P 民了。大势所趋！

The fifty-cent have all been laid off, it's not that easy to be a flunkey, even some started to become a shitizen. This is an irresistible trend!

In summary, the use of “fifty-cent” as a membership category in the Chinese cyberspace is multifaceted and contested. Online commenters invoked this category not only to identify, mock, and dehumanize potential fifty-cent commenters for their blind support of the government and officials, but also to advertise their own posts especially when they present a different perspective from the dominant view on social and political issues, such as the Zhou Jiugeng incident in this case. Many commenters demonstrated their deep awareness that the Chinese Internet is infiltrated with government-hired fifty-cent and that this peculiar political environment (both online and offline) is what they have to live with regarding their political participation. More interestingly, the use of fifty-cent category was less about identifying who was actually an authentic member of this group than it was about soliciting and confirming a united front against government corruption. Once a commenter is called out by others for communicating a favorable stance toward officials or the government, that person runs the risk of being collectively attacked as a fifty-cent. In this sense, the identification of a fifty-cent in the Chinese cyberspace was somewhat subjective and therefore often a contested issue.

4.7 Conclusion

The very existence of multiple citizen-related membership categories evidenced a change in Chinese (online) public discourse that is enabled and simultaneously constrained by China's interlocked conditions of politics, technology, history, and culture. "Netizen," "shitizen," and "fifty-cent" are newly emerged membership categories that capture at least an important aspect of being, feeling, acting, relating, and dwelling in China in this day and age. Similar to what Szablewicz (2014) and Yang et al. (2015) observed about the meaningfulness (political, socio-economic, or affective) of "Diaosi-loser", these emergent membership categories are used by online commenters to discuss, under the current political regime, what it means to be a Chinese in Internet-mediated China; to negotiate the relationship between the government/officials and members of these categories; and more importantly to debate on the possibility and capacity of category members to create socio-political change in China, especially with regard to eliminating government corruption.

Traditional membership categories such as "common folks," "the people," and "citizens" have also taken on new meanings in contemporary Chinese public discourse. For example, common folks, though they are still positioned at the bottom of Chinese society (socio-economically and politically), as they were in ancient feudal China, are expected to take a more active political role in relation to the government/officials and a failing political system than merely passively waiting for government officials to take care of their interests. Online commenters' discussion of "common folks" fomenting social change by participating in online collective actions (i.e. topping posts) can be interpreted as an attempt to reconstruct the category of "common folks" in the Internet era and to negotiate a new relationship between the

government and common folks. Within this new relationship, government officials are no longer perceived as “parent officials” to “serve the people” and common folks are no longer powerless and passive with respect to their political participation.

It is important to note, however, that the development of new meanings of these membership categories in Chinese public discourse is accompanied by a historical continuity in making sense of “citizenship” and “official-citizen” relationship in the Chinese context. For instance, although “netizen” is a new membership category emerging out of people’s use of the Internet in China, it is rendered by some online commenters as a similar category to a very politically prominent category in modern Chinese history, namely, “red guards” in the sense that they share the same “mob-like” feature and are more likely to be politically charged. In addition, online commenters brought back the “class discourse” into their online discussion and used it as a reference point to make sense of a changing relationship between the government and the people. “Class struggle,” “enemy of the people,” and “cultural revolution,” to name just a few terms, are naturally made relevant by online commenters to express their political stance (typically negative) toward the government and officials, and to deliberate on the possibility of creating socio-political change in Chinese society through the Internet.

Although these six membership categories overlap and some of them share similar categorical features (such as the “moral superiority and power” of *the people* and *common folks*), online commenters treated these categories as distinctively different from each other in some situations and sometimes these categories were played against each other to accomplish socio-political actions such as constructing their own identity as a member of one category, mocking the government, or offering a different perspective on social problems (e.g., corruption) from the standpoint of a certain category membership. For instance, online commenters engaged in the

creation of two sub-types of “netizens” in order to distance themselves from the other radical groups who were labeled as mad, irrational, and red guards like “internet mobs.”

Categorical features associated with each category were often contested in the online public discourse. Apart from the debate on who is an “authentic” member of “netizens” (*rational thinkers* vs. *internet mobs*), the contestation was primarily focused on two questions in relation to Chinese people’s political actions on the Internet: 1) whether online collective actions such as “human flesh search” can successfully curb and/or eliminate the corruption of officials, and 2) whether members of *the people* and *common folks* should initiate their revolution against the Chinese Communist Party’s rule of China. These contestations suggest that the actual meanings of these membership categories in Chinese political culture are actually more complex and fluctuating than is normatively expected. In particular, online commenters’ construction of two types of netizens (*internet mobs* and *rational thinkers*) among themselves, as well as their voluntary self-identification as a “fifty-cent,” suggests that online commenters’ membership categorization practices are strategic in nature. In other words, the contestation on categorical features (as shown in the current case) bears a close relationship with the involved online commenters’ personal and political agendas. For instance, self-disclosed “fifty-cent” membership, despite its negative connotations (i.e., an unethical and immoral running dog of the government), serves as a practical means for online commenters to draw attention to their posts on the Internet, and also a playful trap for them to identify the “real” fifty-cent on the Chinese Internet.

The analysis of these six membership categories in this case study offers insights into a situated understanding of changing notions and practices of “citizenship” and government-citizen relationships in Internet-mediated China. With these findings in mind, next we will turn to the

second case study about a Chinese woman's dispute with law enforcement officers at Gulangyu island in Xiamen. Similar to the analysis we presented in this chapter, we will continue to examine this woman and online commenters' use of the six membership categories, focusing on their interpretations of what it means to be a Chinese and how to relate to government officials in contemporary China.

CHAPTER 5: CASE ANALYSIS #2: THE XIAMEN WOMAN–CITY INSPECTORS

CASE

By analyzing citizenship-related membership categories, this chapter sheds light on Chinese people's sense-making of what it means to be an ordinary Chinese and how they negotiate a changing relationship with government officials (in particular “city inspectors”) with the technological affordances such as smart phones and the Internet. All of the six Chinese membership categories of citizenship (as discussed in Chapter 3) appeared in this Xiamen Woman case study. (See Table 5.1) These categories are used by her as well as by online commenters not only to express their understanding of what it is like to be an ordinary Chinese living under single-party rule, but also to comment on official-citizen relationships (characterized by antagonism) and other social-political problems currently troubling Chinese society (e.g., violent law enforcement and local governments' illegal requisition of land).

In what follows, I first describe the defining features associated with each membership category: how they are used by online commenters to construct a membership of Chinese citizenship for themselves and their fellows and to express their views on governance in China. Based on this description, I then discuss how online commenters use these membership categories to make sense of Chinese citizenship, governance, and a changing relationship between the state and its people. I conclude this chapter by highlighting some key observations

from the analysis of these categories and discussing the implications of using these categories of citizenship for understanding Internet-mediated social change and the multiple ways of doing politics (and being political) in contemporary China.

Table 5.1 The distribution of key membership categories in Case #2 ³²

Membership Categories	Occurrences	Occurred in No. of data files/all files ³³	Percentage
(老)百姓 /(lao) bai xing Common folk	3997	9/9	100%
人民/ren min People	1442	9/9	100%
公民/gong min Citizen	570	6/9	66.7%
五毛/ wu mao Fifty-Cent	266	5/9	55.6%
网民/wang min Netizen	102	3/9	33.3%
屁民 & P 民/ pi min Shitizen	81	3/9	33.3%

³² It is important to note that the purpose of displaying the distribution of these categorical terms in the database is not to show how frequent (and thus important) these terms are. In fact, some of the terms (e.g., wangmin/*netizen* and pimin/*shitizen*) are infrequent in comparison with other keywords (e.g., chengguan/city inspectors) in the data, nevertheless, these six membership categories of *citizenship* closely related to the research questions of our concern in this dissertation project and thus they become the focus of our analysis in this chapter.

³³ Data for this case study was collected from four sites and then saved into four data files. These data files were then divided into 9 data files based on a defaulted time threshold about all the comments made within a certain time span as shown on the site where these comments were collected.

5.1 Common Folk/(老)百姓/(Lao)Baixing

“Human rights, where is it in China? Who is going to protect common folk’s property?”

“Why don’t you go to the Diaoyu Islands³⁴ with such a lineup³⁵? Why do you come to a common folk’s home?”

In this five-minute interaction³⁶ between a Chinese woman in Xiamen (a provincial city in southeastern China) and government agents led by city inspectors, the term “common folk” (老百姓/lao bai xing) appeared seven times. The utterances above serve as an example of how the Chinese woman invoked this membership category in her talk. Her use of this categorical term in this case study is culturally distinctive and normative in the sense that many online commenters not only highlighted but also explicitly voiced their acceptance of her rendering of the “common folk” in their comments. That is to say, this woman’s categorization of the “common folk” is done recognizably and thus this categorization becomes culturally recognizable. Since there are six different Chinese membership categories of citizenship (as we introduced in Chapter 3), we may wonder why is it that this woman invoked only this category

³⁴ “Diaoyu Islands” (钓鱼岛/diaoyudao in Chinese) is the Chinese way of referencing a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea. The historical ownership of this territory has been heatedly debated between China, Taiwan, and Japan and it has emerged as one of the top sovereignty disputes in contemporary China.

³⁵ “The lineup” here includes the Chinese public security officers, armed police, and city inspectors filled up in four vehicles.

³⁶ See Appendix 1 for the full transcription of this interaction.

“*laobaixing*/common folk” in her interaction with these government agents, but not other membership categories such as “*gongmin*/citizen.”

Based on our discussion in Chapter 3, we see that “common folk,” originally a feudal social address term in ancient China, signifies a specific type of state-people relationship within which government officials are expected to play the role of “parent officials” bearing social and moral responsibilities for the common people (Shi, 2000). This normative rendering of “governance” and “citizenship” (such as the “common folk”) has been found in China’s traditional political culture, particularly in the writings of Confucius (e.g., *Analects*) and Mencius (e.g., *Mencius*). According to Nuyen (2002), it is the social responsibility and moral obligation of government (officials) to govern for the people, protecting them against poverty and insecurity. “Common folk,” strongly associated with the disadvantaged, the poor, and the powerless in contemporary Chinese society, probably provides the most straightforward explanation of why ordinary people are in need of protection for their well-being (due to their marginalized position in society). Nevertheless, with China entering into a market economy and the strong “economic spin” in the practice of governance, changing social relations and new identity formations become possible, as is the question of appropriate conduct and social obligation (of both citizens and governments) (Keane, 2001). In this context, both the notion and the practice of “citizenship” and “governance” are subject to new interpretations.

The Chinese woman in this case study demonstrates in her talk how ordinary people understand what it means to be a Chinese citizen and what (good) governance is about from the standpoint of the “common folk.” Below we will examine the use of this category by this woman and online commenters in order to shed light on new interpretations of “citizenship” and “governance” in Internet-mediated China in the 21st century. This examination starts from a

membership categorization analysis of the woman's interaction with city inspectors and their fellow officers in this case study. Before pursuing our analysis, it is important to note that "common folk" as a Chinese expression of "citizens," appears in the data along with its standard relational pairs of categories, such as "city inspectors (城管/*chengguan*)" "law enforcement officers (执法人员/*zhifa ren yuan*)," "government officials (政府官员/*zhengfu guanyuan*)," and "the state (国家/*guojia*). In view of the close relationship between these categories, my analysis will pay attention to commenters' discussions about these relational pairs in addition to the focus on membership categories of "citizenship" (e.g., the common folk).

Data Excerpt 5.1 ³⁷

(W: the Chinese woman; C5: city inspectors No.5; C: all city inspectors; BS: bystanders, the surrounding onlookers at the site)

39 (0:02:22.8)	W:	需要什么手续你告诉我.我这花台落地了吗, 占用国家的土地了吗, 对吧?	Tell me what procedure do I need. Is my flower-stand standing on the ground, occupying the state land, right?
40 (0:02:24.4)	C5:	好了 少说几句吧	Alright no point saying more
41 (0:02:35.2)	W:	不是少说几句的问题, 要讲道理. 中国是个人权社会, 对吧, 老百姓的财产都不能保护的话 都没有的话, 那还体现什么人权啊. 是不是	It's not a matter of saying more, we need to talk reasonably. China is a society respecting human rights, right, if the property of common folks cannot be protected, how can we know human rights being validated. Isn't it
42 (0:02:40.3)	C:	((城管沉默不语))	((all city inspectors responded in silence))
((turns omitted))			
45 (0:04:18.9)	W:	还动用了我们武警这么大的阵容, 几部车 多少人头算一算, 对不对 中国的人权	Why are armed policemen mobilized, such a big line-up, how many cars how many people you can count, right, where are human rights in China and who is

³⁷ This data excerpt is extracted from the Xiamen woman's interaction with law enforcement officers. The Chinese transcription of this whole interaction is included in Appendix 1.

		在哪里,老百姓的财产谁来保护啊 四部车子公安的城管的,对吧 武警的全部都出动,有这样的阵容为什么不到钓鱼岛去 为什么到鼓浪屿老百姓家里呢	going to protect common folk's property. Ah, four cars filled with policemen, city inspectors, alright, armed police too. If you can pull together such a show, why don't you go to Diaoyu Islands why do you come to a common folk's home on Gulangyu?
46 (0:04:20.9)	BS:	好 说的好 说的好	Awesome well said
47 (0:04:39.3)	W:	是不是 中国的钓鱼岛需要你们呢 对不对 是不是,领导同志啊 这种阵容不是对老百姓的了 应该要去对钓鱼岛,四部车子 这样的阵容 全部武装(对付)老百姓 一个鼓浪屿岛比钓鱼岛还能干吗 还厉害吗 还严重吗?	Right. China needs you to protect Diaoyu island. Right, isn't it. Leaders and comrades this kind of show is not for the commonfolk anymore, but for Diaoyu Island. Four cars and such a line-up, all armed forces against the commonfolk. Is (a common folk's civic matter on) the Gulangyu island more threatening, severer and more serious than the (international) disputes about the Diaoyu Islands?
48 (0:04:44.1)	BS:	((围观者鼓掌))	((bystanders applauding))
49 (0:04:44.6)	W:	谢谢 谢谢	Thank you Thank you

At the beginning of this interaction (0:00:04.2-0:01:36.9), the Chinese woman and city inspectors confronted each other on several issues, ranging from *whether the woman should put her flower-stand outside on the street* to *who owns the property certificate of the house in she is living*³⁸. Their interaction started with a sharp and confrontational tone, but gradually city inspectors (and public security officers and armed police officers) became quite inarticulate, responding largely in silence to this woman's bold claims and accusations of these officers' inappropriate law enforcement. For instance, at one point (0:01:37.4) this woman asked, "*The Chinese Communist Party has only existed for 90 years but my house has been here for over 100*

³⁸ During this interaction, both parties asked the other to show their possession of a property certificate for this house. In China, the property certification (房产证/*fangchan zheng*) is the only legal documentation of someone's possession of a residential house. Interestingly, neither the woman nor the city inspectors displayed their certification.

years, so how can you ask me for a property certificate of this house?" In response these officers simply stood in silence. This kind of "questioning-silence (as an answer)" adjacency pair continued several times till these officers eventually escaped from the site in a state of dejection. Data Excerpt 5.1 provides an example of how this Chinese woman engaged in a "public moral lecturing" of these officers through several discursive moves (notably her activation of the category "common folk") and how these officers tried to quieten down this woman; in vain, they left the scene.

In turn 39, the Chinese woman reiterated the key questions she raised at the beginning of this interaction, pressing city inspectors and their fellow officers to participate in the activity of "speaking reasonably" (讲道理/*jiang daoli*), and more importantly altercasting these officers as being the "unreasonable." In response, one of the city inspectors (C5) in turn 40 first acknowledged what the woman said in the previous turn and then urged her to stop talking. His use of this Chinese expression "少说几句" (or "no point saying more") is commonly heard during a quarrel or a dispute when someone (like a mediator) attempts to quiet one or both of the parties involved. Here in turn 40, C5 took up this role between the two quarreling parties – the Chinese woman and the leading city inspector (C1). It seemed that he was trying to quiet the woman down, on the one hand, while rejecting her attribution of city inspectors as "the unreasonable" on the other hand. Nevertheless, this woman continued. In turn 41, not only did she not stop talking, she also refuted C5's proposal of a potential solution to this dispute, that is, saying less. She reframed her talk in turn 39 as an effort of "talking reasonably" instead of "merely saying (nonsense)." To continue her "reasonable talk," this woman invoked the membership category "common folk" – for the first time in this interaction – and cleverly tied it to the issue of "human rights" in China. As she argued in turn 41, common folk's properties

should be protected (by the government), which reflects the fundamental aspect of human rights. In fact, her association of common folk's properties with "human rights" was disputable and was heatedly contested among online commenters on this interaction. Nevertheless, city inspectors and their fellow officers on the site could not refute this association. They remained in silence.

This woman continued her "lecturing" of these officers for over a minute (0:02:40.3-0:04:18.9) till they eventually fled the scene in dejection. In turn 45, she further pursued the idea that these officers (and their execution of law enforcement) were being unreasonable by painting a sharp contrast between the "powerful law enforcement officers" and the "powerless common folk." She started by depicting this rather unusual and spectacular scene in front of her house – "four cars filled with city inspectors, public security officers, and armed policemen," followed by a query about the protection of human rights and the common folk under this situation. Then she concluded her turn with a contrastive rhetorical question implying the "unreasonableness" of these officers coming to her house with such a lineup. Within this rhetorical question, she cleverly challenged the reasonableness of this law enforcement as well as the accountability of the government officers by suggesting that the officers (especially the armed police officers) should use their weapons to protect China's territories (e.g., the Diaoyu Islands) but not target their own people. It is at this point she invoked the category "common folk" once again.

There are two things noticeable with respect to her use of this category. First, the woman commented on what happened in front of her house not in terms of something happening to her personally but rather to the ordinary Chinese people –the common folk. This discursive move is noticeable not only because of the contentious sociocultural and political meanings associated with this category in the Chinese context, but also because of its rather broad and loose reference in Chinese public discourse. In turn 45, the woman could have asked, who are going to protect

“her” private property and why these officers (including armed police officers) came to “her” house. Instead, she talked about these things as if they were happening to any ordinary person in the category of “common folk”. Through this discursive move, this woman categorized herself as a member of the common folk, and more importantly, a member of this particular social group that has been typically portrayed as poor, marginalized, and powerless in Chinese society (Cai, 2009; Zhang, 2015).³⁹

Secondly, this woman brought up the high profile issue of “human rights” to direct audiences attention to the protection of common folks’ property rights in China. The issue of “human rights” is highly profiled as well as contentious in the Chinese context, thus the intertextuality of this “rights talk” in this instance becomes immediately noticeable. By invoking the well-known topic of “human rights,” the woman was able to further her public appeal for the protection of her property in front of all the surrounding tourists, especially on an occasion when law enforcement officers directly come to a civilian’s home with such a lineup. Some online commenters and the surrounding tourists responded to this woman’s appeal affirmatively (see turn 46); while other online commenters challenged this woman by noting that the condition of “human rights” in China has nothing to do with what was happening at her place.

This woman’s use of the “common folk” category, as discussed above, implicates a normative relationship between government officials (i.e. law enforcement officers) and the people (i.e. the common folk) in the Chinese political-cultural contexts. High-profile political issues such as “human rights” and the “Diaoyu Islands disputes” were strategically brought up in

³⁹ It is important to note that this woman’s self-categorization as a member of the common folk group was challenged by some online commenters. For further details, please refer to the following section where the use of this membership category among online commenters is discussed.

her talk to tie certain categorical features to the “common folk” and “law enforcement officers.” By calling for the protection of common folks’ property rights (in tandem with “human rights”) in China and by questioning the presence of armed officers at a civilian’s home instead of the Diaoyu islands, she highlighted crucial features and activities associated with two membership categories: “*common folks* should be protected (because of they’re the weak and powerless group in society)” and “*government officials* should protect the nation and its people.” As Jayyusi (1984) noted, membership categorization work is deeply embedded in a culturally situated moral order and members’ performance (of duties, rights, and activities) is always assessed, implicitly or explicitly, against the normative and moral standards that are culturally linked with this category. In this interaction, this Chinese woman categorized the common folk and government officials in a culturally normative way in terms of highlighting essential descriptors associated with these categories and assessing category members’ performance of their duties and rights in accordance with these categorical features. She explicitly tied the category feature “protecting the Diaoyu islands” (instead of “coming to a common folk’s place”) to “city inspectors and their fellow officers.” Furthermore, her categorization of the common folk in relation to “government officials” activated a distinct way of relating between the two parties in China’s traditional political culture, that is, government officials ought to play the role of “parent officials” to protect the people, especially people like common folks who are poor, marginalized, and powerless in society.

This normative rendering of the Chinese “government-citizen” relationship, apparently accepted by a crowd of onlookers as they cheered for this woman appreciatively in turn 46, was further revealed in turn 47. She shifted from her interrogative tone in turn 45 to an imperative

one, explicitly informing these officers of their administrative (and moral) duties⁴⁰ – protecting the country’s territory by fighting against Japan on the Diaoyu islands rather than bullying common folks with armed forces. In particular, her iteration of these officers coming to her home within such a lineup invoked this normative rendering of government officials-citizen relationship but also challenged the legitimacy and righteousness of this kind of conduct (law enforcement). It is notable that in her talk she used the category “common folk” rather than “citizen” or “civilian” to reference a social group upon whom law enforcement was often enacted in such a manner. Additionally, the rhetorical question she articulated at the end of turn 47, “Is (a common folk’s civic matter on) the Gulangyu island more threatening and severer than the (international) disputes about the Diaoyu Islands?” functioned as another powerful discursive move to highlight these officers’ violation of normative standards of political and moral justice within China’s political culture. Through this rhetorical question, the Xiamen woman was able to construct these officers and their law enforcement as illegitimate and immoral.

Her moral critique of these officers and their law enforcement was received affirmatively by the crowd of onlookers (as shown in turn 48) as well as the majority of online commenters who watched this interaction on the Internet. Based on the analysis above, it can be argued that this woman strategically identified herself with this typically marginalized, poor, and powerless group (the common folk) within Chinese society in order to “win her battle” over these law enforcement officers in front of her house. Although her avowed “common folk” identity was challenged by some online commenters, her performance could be considered a success given

⁴⁰ Some online commenters criticized this woman for talking none sense in making the claim that city inspectors should go to the Diaoyu islands to protect China’s territory as they are affiliated with a special kind of force within the Chinese government system who only have administrative power but not executive power.

the enthusiastic cheers from the crowd on-site as well as the fact that these officers fled the scene in the end. Now we will turn to the analysis of how online commenters make sense of what it means to be an ordinary Chinese through the membership category of “common folk” in their comments on this interaction between this Chinese woman and government (law enforcement) officers.

5.1.1 The “common folk” Category in Online Comments

The “common folk,” the most frequently invoked membership category in Chinese commenters’ online comments (see Table 5.1), is categorized in multifaceted and competing ways. On the one hand, online commenters aligned with this Chinese woman’s categorization of common folks as typically being marginalized and oppressed (economically, socially, and politically) within Chinese society, while, on the other hand, they entertained the progressive vision of “common folks” as “more capable” (e.g., *knowing the law, the ability to reason, using the Internet*) with regard to protecting their own rights in contemporary China. Perhaps it is because of these two competing categorizations of the common folk embedded in contemporary Chinese public discourse, online commenters’ reactions to this woman’s self-identification as a member of this social group diverged from one another. Our analysis shows that many a speaker on the Internet regarded this woman (and her performance) as serving a “good model” for this new type of progressive common folks and thus they applauded what she accomplished in that particular situation. Other online commenters, however, rejected her avowed “common folk” identity on the basis of the incongruence they felt between this woman and the traditional social constructions of the common folk (e.g., the poor, uneducated, and marginalized). It is interesting to note within these divergent responses that “class” became a major principle by which online

commenters evaluate whether this woman represents the “authentic” member of the common folk group. Data Examples 5.2 offers a good illustration of these observations.

Data Examples 5.2 ⁴¹

C1 说得太好了！中国就需要这样的老百姓！如果老百姓都像这位大姐一样，也许我们的国家还有得救！

Well said! China needs common folks of such kind! If common folks are all like this big sister, perhaps our country can still be saved!

C2 推荐给天下所有老百姓看看，字字有力，句句有理！堪称维权成功的典范！

Recommend all common folks under the heaven watch this, every word is powerful and every sentence is sensible! This is absolutely a successful model of rights protection!

C3 虽然我是2014年才看这个片段，但是比看大片还舒服，大姐，真服了，老百姓都得向你学习，得反抗，他还没话说。

Although I have not watched this clip until the year of 2014, it is such a pleasure watching this than blockbuster movies, big sister, I admire you, common folks all need to learn from you, to resist (city inspectors) in such a way that make him say nothing more.

C4 其实看完后挺痛心的，大姐其实是个很明事理的人，但听她一个人面对着这么多的城管，就这样站在她面前围观，其实前段时间的所谓的“文明执法”一大帮人围住人家，感觉有点像恐吓，就一个正常人，如果面对这么多人，多少也会有点紧张，更何況是这么多城管，大姐能这样沉着冷静真的很不容易，就这样的一件事，就派了这么多的人，这架势，估计一般老百姓是架不住的，咱中国所谓的文明执法也就这样了，一多欺少。

Actually, I feel very distraught after watching this, this big sister is actually a very sensible person, but listening to her (speaking) in front of so many city inspectors who were just standing there, fencing her up and watching her, in fact some time ago the so-called “civil law enforcement” – a big group of officers surrounded someone – feels somewhat like intimidation, if just a normal person (standing there), in front of so many people, more or less they would feel a bit nervous, let alone all these city inspectors, it is indeed extraordinary that this big sister can act in such a cool and composed manner, it is just such a (minor) thing, so many officers were sent, such a posture, probably no ordinary common folk can handle this, the so-called civil law enforcement in our country is just like this, acting in a way of a big group bullying the individual.

⁴¹ Similar to our organization of data examples in case study #1, these comments included under the same data excerpt are not contiguous in the data. They are comments posted by different commenters but are clustered together to illustrate a common theme regarding a specific membership category.

C5 话说回来，能在鼓浪屿有房子的，那也不是工薪阶层老百姓啊

Anyway, if she can own a house on the Gulangyu island, then she is just not a common folk of the working class.

C6 钓鱼岛和我们老百姓有什么关系？这是遇到文明执法的了，有多少暴力执法的？，你口才好就打到你不能说话，该感谢视频中的执法人员文明执法。

What does the Diaoyu islands have anything to do with us the common folks? This happens to be civil law enforcement; don't you know how many officers practice violent law enforcement out there? If you speak eloquently then they beat you to not being able to say anything, you (the Chinese woman) should thank these civil law enforcement officers.

Online commenters in C1, C2, and C3 all explicitly recognized this woman not just as a member of the common folk group but more importantly an extraordinary member. They considered her way of speaking forceful, sensible, and highly effective in dealing with law enforcement officers like city inspectors in China. They appreciated this woman's talk to such a degree that they considered her a "good model" for all the "ordinary common folk" in their cause of fighting for justice. It is interesting to note that her forceful and argumentative way of speaking was not just highly acclaimed by these commenters, but more importantly it was rendered as the defining feature of the (good) "common folks" who can stand up against oppression, protect their rights, and even make China strong again. This rhetoric, in particular C1, bears a similarity to what Liang Qichao uttered over a hundred years ago, that is, China needs a special kind of "citizen" to rebuild China. Differing from Liang's remark in face of Western imperialism and domestic chaos in the late 19th century, these commenters from C1-C3 are more concerned about the issue of government officials' power abuse and violent law enforcement in contemporary Chinese society.

The “out of ordinary” categorical feature of this Chinese woman as a common folk was further highlighted in C4 where the speaker problematized the official slogan of “civil law enforcement,” especially with regard to city inspectors and their approach to law enforcement. In this comment, the speaker explicitly separated this woman from the rest of the social group – the “ordinary common folk.” Additionally, the speaker in C5, challenged the woman’s “common folk” identity on the basis of her class. Owning a house on the Gulangyu island –a famous tourist destination in the city of Xiamen in Southeastern China, according to this speaker, indicated the owner’s affluent social and class status that is way beyond the reach of a common folk living at the bottom of Chinese society. This speaker apparently invoked this typical (and traditional) view of the common folk group as economically, socially and politically marginalized against which this woman’s performance was evaluated. In other words, her seemingly upper middle-class identity, suggested by this speaker, contradicted her self-claimed “common folk” identity. The speaker in C6, instead of focusing on this woman’s class background, found faults in her talk, challenging the “reasonableness” of her claims such as urging city inspectors to go to the Diaoyu islands. This speaker apparently considered himself (or herself) a member of the common folk, but not this woman, as shown in the first rhetorical question in C6, “what does the Diaoyu islands have anything to do with us the common folk?”

The contestation of this woman’s identification with the “common folk” (as discussed above) reveals two competing views in Chinese public discourse regarding the makeup and capacities of members in this category. Some commenters seemed to uphold a rather restrictive view on who the common folks are, namely, the weak, marginalized, and powerless grassroots; while others are more willing to extend the boundary of this category and to embrace a more progressive image of this group –who has the courage and the potential communicative means to

protect their rights in China (such as what this woman did in this case). The former view corresponds to a “traditional” and yet dominant representation of the common folks in the Chinese context, as Zhang (2015) notes “common folks” is closely associated with discourses of insignificance, obedience, and powerlessness in contemporary news media. The latter view of “progressive” common folks, however, signals a change in contemporary public discourses concerning ordinary people’s agency and their abilities to challenge power abuse and fight for social-political justice in the Internet era. More importantly, we found these two competing views intertwined and co-existing in Chinese public discourse, as evidenced in the current case study. Below we will turn to examining these two divergent categorizations of “common folks” for the purpose of painting a dynamic and nuanced picture of citizenship-related membership categorization in contemporary China.

Data Examples 5.3

C7 作为一个普通老百姓，要是我，老实说，绝对不敢多啰嗦，一想说话声音大一点，搞不好对方就给一个嘴巴，心里是战巍巍的。别说是公务员队伍或者执法人员了，就是一般事业单位的行政人员，只要你有事需要他（她）办，你就得陪着笑脸、仔细着说话，做好应对对方冷水、冷脸的心里准备。在中国，在政府，在机关，在事业单位，要是求人办到什么事，作为小民，瞬间有一种“皇恩浩荡”的感觉，恨不得跪下来，感谢对方把自己当人看，把工作当工作看（至少我是这样体验的），哎，鲁迅先生要是在世，肯定骂我，小兄弟，真“中国人”！奴性啊奴性 所以，作为一个在天朝被 S 惯了的 M，我很佩服这位大姐张嘴回击的勇气、宏大的音量和激昂的情绪...谨再拜！！

As an ordinary common folk, if I were (the Xiamen woman), to be honest, I would never dare to say more than what I should, once I spoke a bit louder, probably I would end up with being slapped, very intimidated while speaking. Administrative staff from general governmental institutions can just treat you like this, let alone the civil servants or city inspectors, if you need to get help from these institutions for something, you will have to be careful about what you say, with a smiling face, and be prepared for their cold looks and discouraging remarks. In China, within the government, in governmental institutions,

if you are seeking for the help of someone for something, as an ordinary people⁴², suddenly you would have an impression of being favored by their infinite royal graciousness, thus you would be itching to immediately kowtow (to them), thanking them for treating you as a human being and for taking seriously about their job (and their duties) (at least this is how I felt), ah, if Lu-xun were still alive, he would definitely scold me like this, little bro, such a “typical Chinese”! So slavish and slavish. Therefore, as a masochist (M) who has got used to being sadisted (S) by the government, I admire this big sister very much for her courage to fight back verbally, for her loud volume and her excitement and compassion...sincerely to bow again!!!

C8 中国老百姓的悲哀啊。。。人家一百多年的房子，你才 90 岁！引用“我家世代都生活在这块土地上。满洲人来了，我这块土地是我的；八国联军来了，这块土地还是我的；袁大头来了，这块土地依然是我的；连 TM 日本鬼子来了都没好意思说这块土地是天皇的。现在你来了，理直气壮地说这块土地是你借给我的你 TM 算个什么东西？

This is the tragedy of Chinese common folk... Their house has been standing there over one-hundred years but you (the Chinese Communist Party) were just founded for ninety years. Quoted from “Our family has been living on this land for generations and generations. The Manchus came, and the land was mine; the Eight- Foreign Power Allied Forces came, and the land was still mine, even the damn Japanese devil came they couldn’t dare to claim that this land belonged to their emperor. Now you (the CCP) came, telling me with confidence and assurance that you lent this land to me, who the fuck are you?”

C9 看看这些国家干部！看看这些律师！！看看这些媒体！！他们分别代表着国家政策、法律公正、舆论导向。这三大方面坐在一起，说的什么？他们代表着国家，本应维护着社会安定、百姓生活。而他们一个忙着辩解、一个使劲帮腔，一个帮他们宣传。似乎百姓是万恶之源。谁来替孱弱的老百姓说话？恐怕只有老百姓自己。Look at these state cadres! Look at these lawyers!! Look at these media (reporters)!!! They represent respectively the national policy, legal justice, and the guidance of public opinion. These three parties sit together, talking about what? They represent the nation and should maintain social stability and common folks’ (prosperous) life. However, one of them is bound up in defending themselves, the other trying very hard to voice their support, and the last one is dedicated to advertise (for the government and officials). They all made the common folks sound like the evil of everything. Who is going to speak for the weak common folks? I am afraid only the common folk themselves.

⁴² Here “ordinary people” is a translation of the Chinese expression of *xiaomin*/小民 which literally means “petty people” but its interactional meaning based on how it is used in this comment is very similar to “the common folk.”

C10 还专门做一个视频来批判老百姓，执法部门有这么多手段，老百姓到底有什么可以抵抗？无论是非，我关心弱者，我们是不是缺少了人文关怀？我很讨厌该律师说弱者利用民意⁴³，利用对城管的反感；我想问：你们可以利用的太多，老百姓呢？

(These law enforcement departments) even created a video to criticize common folks, law enforcement departments have so many means, what does the common folk have indeed to resist? No matter who is right and who is wrong, I care about the weak, are we lacking some humanistic care (in law enforcement)? I hate what this lawyer said very much that the weak (i.e. the Chinese woman) attempted to take advantage of the popular public opinion – the aversion to city inspectors; I wanted to respond to her with this question: You all can take advantage of so many, then how about the common folk?

Online commenters in the above comments, for example, alluded to this “traditional” and prevailing image of common folks in Chinese political culture –being disadvantaged, powerless, and disenfranchised. In C7, the speaker explicitly labeled himself (or herself) a “common folk” and then provided a vivid description of what it is like to be a member of this group when interacting with the powerful government agencies, officials and civil servants. Speaking from personal experience, this speaker depicted this power imbalance in which the common folks are typically positioned as powerless and disadvantaged in contrast with the powerful government officials and civil servants. This power imbalance is taken for granted by the majority of members in the “common folk” category and thus they appeared to be overtly submissive and obedient in their interaction with the government. In other words, it is within this power imbalance that many a Chinese came to construe who they are as ordinary people (like the common folks) and how they relate to the ruling government. It is also notable that this speaker’s

⁴³ Here the speaker was responding to a remark made by a Chinese lawyer on a news program at the local TV that this woman in Gulangyu island was attempting to utilize public opinions against city inspectors in contemporary China in order to forward her personal agenda of taking up public space with her flower stands outside.

portrayal of “the common folk” corresponds to the traditional image of this group being passive and overly submissive, exactly like what Lu Xun (one of the most influential Chinese literary critic depicted in his novels and short stories – the backwards of the Chinese masses (Lovell, 2009). Moreover, the intertextuality of some expressions such as “infinite royal graciousness” (皇恩浩荡/*huang'en haodang*) and “kowtow” (下跪/*xiagui*) in C7 brought back to life this absolute power and authority of the state (acting in the same manner like an emperor) to which the common folks yield. Using an ironic tone, this speaker seemed to be agonizing about this taken-for-granted relationship while at the same time applauding for this woman’s courage in challenging this power imbalance and the absolute authority of the state. In other words, if this passive and submissive image of common folks is the norm (or what is typically seen) in civilian-government official interaction, this Chinese woman apparently challenged this norm by representing in public a new image of the “common folk” who knows the law and speak reasonably (refer to previous analysis in this chapter). As such, we can argue that because of her portrayal of this proactive image of the common folk, she was praised and accepted by many online commenters as a good model for this socially, economically, and politically disadvantaged group in Chinese society.

Similarly, the speaker in C8 challenged the authoritative power of the ruling state and the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to claim its ownership of land in China. Situating this land dispute in the context of China’s modern history, this speaker expressed great anger and discontent toward the CCP and the current political system by casting the Party in a negative light and calling it worse than the Japanese invaders during the Second World War. The Party and its absolute authoritative power in this instance are framed as “the tragedy of common folks” in China. Linking this categorical feature of “not even be able to claim the ownership of

your land” with “common folks,” this speaker intended to convey a sense of oppression and disenfranchisement from the standpoint of this disadvantaged group in contemporary China. Moreover, as commenters in C9 and C10 indicated, common folks in Chinese society are not only being disenfranchised politically and economically, but also being socially marginalized. This marginalization is reflected through the deprivation of common folks’ right to speak and the lack of proper channels to speak on behalf of this group. These commenters went further depicting an “unfortunate” political and social environment for the common people by unveiling close ties between government officials, professionals in China’s legal system (i.e. lawyers), and the media. These institutions represent three dominant forces in Chinese society; but instead of speaking of and for the common people, they altogether act against the interests of common people. Within such contexts of power asymmetry and media bias, as the speaker in C10 indicated, common folks can sometimes be blamed (and even demonized) in Chinese media for causing all kinds of social problems and yet they have no access to necessary resources or alliances to speak up for themselves.

The deprivation of common folks’ right to speak and the antagonistic relationship between the government and the marginalized common folks in Chinese society, as indicated in C9 and C10, appeared to be salient features of the “common folk” category. Many online speakers criticized the government (with its tight control over Chinese media) for constantly demonizing and fooling the common people through its propaganda discourse. In particular, given the rise of conflicts between city inspectors and civilians in recent years, online commenters have become more sensitive to this antagonism between the government and its people and have grown more critical of Chinese government’s control of various media outlets. For example, in the Xiamen woman’s case, when a lawyer said at a news program on Xiamen

TV that city inspectors' law enforcement was "too polite" in front of the Chinese woman for her violation of the law, online commenters were outraged. They criticized not only the lawyer for covering up for these inspectors and the government, but also the local TV station for covering this dispute with bias against the woman.

As we discussed above, the common folk are typically portrayed as a group who has been economically, socially, and politically disadvantaged disenfranchised, and marginalized in Chinese society. Nevertheless, online commenters participated in constructing a "new image" for members in this group. The speaker in C11, for example, challenged this dominant portrayal of the common folk as the disadvantaged but rather advocated seeing them as the "master of nation." This alternative interpretation of the "common folk" category alludes to this popular political slogan – "serving the people" – in which "the people" (including the common folk) is theoretically positioned above the civil servants (refer to the discussion on "the people" in Chapter 3). Moreover, C11 has another layer of meaning. It is possible that this speaker was being ironic while hitting at an obvious contradiction between how members in this group should be treated (as "masters") and how they are actually being marginalized in Chinese society. Other commenters (as shown in C12, C13, and C14) referenced a new image of the common folk from a slightly different angle. Both commenters in C12 and C13 commented on the "qualities" and "capacities" of the common people to think critically in terms of challenging government officials and the legitimacy of law enforcement (as in this Xiamen woman's case) and to interpret and use law to protect their private property. Similarly, the speaker in C14 highlighted common folks' ability and their right to challenge the legitimacy of any law enforcement. Corresponding to the speaker in C12, this speaker communicated a strong belief about a decisive role that common folks should be playing in evaluating the legitimacy of law enforcement and

government performance in general. The speaker in C12 argued for the recognition of common folks' "socio-political status" in Chinese society, while the speaker in C14 seemed more concerned with the right of this group to exert a check and balance on the government's authoritarian power.

Data Examples 5.4

C11 老百姓和弱势群体画等号了，应该是主人翁才对嘛。
(How come) the common folk is treated as an equivalence to the disadvantaged, they should be the master (of the nation), right?

C12 老百姓素质高了，什么都能看透，这种形象不是一天两天形成的。
The quality of common folks have been leveled up so they can see through (all the deceptions), this kind of image (of the common folk) cannot be achieved very quickly.

C13 “知法律”是老百姓的盾，“用法律”是老百姓的矛。那对的盾支持法律拿对的矛保护自己。
“Knowing the law” is like a shield for common folks, “using the law” is like a spear for common folks. Take up the right shield to support the law and take up the right spear to protect oneself.

C14 执法合理性问题遭受老百姓强烈质疑！百姓质疑不是一天两天了，zf 要知道，天地之间有杆秤，砣是老百姓。
The “reasonableness” of this law enforcement (by city inspectors) is always subject to common folks' fiercely questioning! It is not until just now that the common folks cast their doubts on law enforcement, the government should know that there's a scale to measure everything in this world and the common folks are the weight to measure.

Online commenters' categorization of “common folks” were not just centered on this group's political status, social and economic marginalization or an antagonistic relationship between the state and the people, but also extended to discussions about how common people are actually treated by law enforcement officers as evidenced in this Xiamen woman's case.

Explicitly questioning the city inspectors' behavior toward common folks during law enforcement, these discussions shed light on some normative beliefs about relationships between government officials and citizens in China. In C15, the speaker challenged the legitimacy and accountability of these city inspectors concerning their confrontation with the Chinese woman during law enforcement by bringing in the Communist Party's fundamental code of conduct – “serve the people” and using it as a point of reference to criticize city inspectors' law enforcement in this case. Furthermore, this speaker also invoked a normative belief about the membership category of “government officials” (including city inspectors), that is, these officials are expected to act as “parent officials” to take care of the common folks. In C15, when the speaker declared that “even if a common folk was wrong, to blame him with extreme opinions is the last thing you should do,” the analogy of common folks as “the child” and officials as “the caring parents” became immediately relevant. What the speaker implied here is that city inspectors and other officials should not have confronted this Chinese woman in the way they did, even if the woman may have done something wrong or even violated the law. But instead, as the speaker continued in C15, these officials and law enforcement officers should give full priority to taking care of common people and making sure they are able to live a prosperous life, very similar to what parents would be expected to do for their children. The descriptor of “caring and responsible parents” was rendered a predicate of the “government officials” category by online commenters (like in C15), and similarly, common folks take up the image of “needy and passive children.” In C16 and C17, online commenters continued their problematization of city inspectors' relations with common folks during law enforcement. In both examples, commenters highlighted how common folks were perceived and treated like criminals or felonies by law enforcement officers. The analogy between “common folks” and “criminals,” which these two

commenters contested, reveals other normative features of the “common folk” category. That is, members in this category are usually innocent, harmless and non-threatening in face of law enforcement officers, in sharp contrast to criminals who are dangerous, destructive and even threatening (such as Zhou Kehua, the notorious armed robber between 2004-2012). In the Xiamen woman’s case, given the very “light” nature of her “wrong deed” (i.e. putting her flower stands outside on the street), online commenters seemed further entitled to raise questions about the reasonableness of law enforcements’ actions toward common folks.

Based on our analysis of Date Examples 5.5, we come to see that the “government official” and “common folks” categories are actually invoked as a relational pair in Chinese online commenters’ talk. According to the “rules of application” of membership categories in social interaction (Sacks, 1992), it is not uncommon for commenters to categorize not only members of the common folk group but also government officials, city inspectors, as well as the relationship between these officials and common folks. This “parent officials” image is normatively associated with government civil servants and law enforcement officers who are expected to be caring and responsible for the common folk. In alignment with this categorization of officials, common folks are portrayed as innocent, harmless and non-threatening members of the disadvantaged who should be taken care of. As to the relationship between members of these two categories, a moral component in governance seems relevant. In other words, the moral obligations and responsibilities of government officials and law enforcement become a defining feature of the relationship between the two groups.

Data Examples 5.5

C15 做为一个公务员、干部！你是服务于人民的！就算老百姓有错，你也不该以这样偏激的思想去指责他，dang的宗旨是什么！是压迫人民吗？这种事情根本没有必要搬到电视上来谈！该搬上来的是你们用什么样合情合理的方法解决了这位大妈的生活问题

As a civil servant, a cadre! You serve the people! Even if a common folk was wrong, to blame him with extreme opinions is the last thing you should do, what is the principle of the Party! Is it to oppress the people? It is absolutely unnecessary to feature a dispute of this kind on TV! What should be on TV, however, is through what means you have appropriately and reasonably helped this Mama in (Gulang island) live a better life!

C16 老百姓嘛 用得着拉几车人来搞执法吗？又不是周克华。。那些正义与邪恶化身的咆哮帝们

(We are all) common folks, is it really necessary to put together such a strong lineup loaded on a few vehicles for law enforcement? (We are not) Zhou Kehua⁴⁴.. Those roaring city inspectors are the embodiment of justice and evil at the same time.

C17 执法人员执法的时候对待老百姓就像囚犯一样理直气壮的还带好多人，顶此女子思路清晰，口齿伶俐，厉害，才女

These law enforcement officers treated common folks just like criminals, with such a demeanor and lineup, I support this woman, she can think clearly and speak eloquently, (she is) awesome, a talented woman.

This moral coloring in defining officials-common folks relationship also applies to the categorization of the common folk. Whether it is about the city inspectors' contentious law enforcement or the Chinese lawyer's disputable remark about city inspectors being "too polite" in front of the Xiamen woman during law enforcement, online commenters responded to these issues from a moral perspective. For instance, in Data Examples 5.6, both commenters in C18 and C19 activated a moral-cultural logic through which they came to make sense of the lawyer's remark and city inspectors' law enforcement. In C18, the speaker questioned the lawyer's

⁴⁴ The name of Zhou Kehua arouse to Chinese public attention as a notorious armed robber from 2004 to 2012. He possessed three handguns, killing 11 and injuring 5 during his six robberies. In 2012, he was shot dead on site after he fired at policemen who were chasing him after an attempted robbery.

controversial remark not from a legal perspective but rather from a moral-normative understanding of “common folks” in China’s political culture. “No matter how wrong they are, common folks are always part of the people,” the speaker here linked these two terms of citizenships – “common folks” and “the people.” Making this linkage not only enables the speaker to accentuate the important political status of common folks (same as “the people” which is typically associated with the “master of the nation” in Mao’s era) but also to raise moral questions about enforcing the law on this group by force, a message that was believed to conveyed by the Chinese lawyer in her remark on a local TV program about this Xiamen woman’s case. Similarly, the speaker in C19 performed a moral critique on city inspectors’ law enforcement by referring to common folks’ powerless and marginalized status in China’s political system and then the activation of Chinese traditional cultural values embedded in Confucius teachings. These Confucius values and beliefs are intertextualized as the ultimate ideal against which these city inspectors’ actions are evaluated.

Data Examples 5.6

C18 什么律师啊? 话怎么从你嘴里讲出来就变味道了, 老百姓再不对也是我们的人民, 你想怎么强制或硬性处理啊。

What a lawyer! How come anything coming out of your mouth sounds so bitter, common folks, no matter how wrong they are, are always part of our people, how do you want to deal with them, by force or by following rigid rules(?)

C19 欺负小老百姓算啥能耐? 还要不要脸, 你的教养呢? 你的尊严呢? 中华上下几千年的文化修养道德伦理、礼仪廉耻呢?

How capable you (the chief city inspector) are can we say about you if what you do is just to bully the powerless common folk? Don’t you feel ashamed, where is your cultivation? Your pride? How about the moral ethnics, senses of righteousness and shame, and cultural cultivations that have passed on in China for thousands of years?

To sum up, the “common folk” is a culturally distinctive and normative membership category in Chinese public discourse for people to make sense of what it means to be an ordinary Chinese and how should the government relate to its people (i.e. the common folk). The Xiamen woman in this case study demonstrated a highly notable way of categorizing the common folk in contemporary Chinese society. Her association of “human rights” with “the common folk” (but not “citizens” or “the people”) was an unusual move, but a highly strategic one. Despite the contentiousness of this association, she was able to activate in her talk these normative descriptors of the “common folk” category to position herself as the disadvantaged, marginalized, and powerless in this situation. Her identification with the common folk group served not only as a strategy to solicit sympathy and social support from the surrounding onlookers during her interaction with city inspectors, but also an attempt to altercast those officers and their conduct (i.e. law enforcement) as “unreasonable” and “immoral.” In this sense, the common folk category is used as a discursive resource for this woman to portray a desirable identity (a powerless and vulnerable common folk) in this particular situation (i.e. the confrontation with law enforcement officers) and to perform a moral critique of those officers’ conduct by raising questions about the “unreasonableness” of how she (as a common folk) was treated in this situation. This woman’s categorization of the common folk is closely tied to another membership category—“government officials”—the relational pair. Her use of these two categories indicates a normative relationship between the government and its people. Because of the common folk having been typically considered as the weak, the poor, and the disadvantaged in Chinese society, government officials are expected to take up the role of “a parent” protecting the interests of this group. This normative belief about the government-people relationship, implied in this woman’s talk, resonated with most online commenters in this case. Government officials’ moral

obligations and responsibilities for the common folk emerged as a defining feature of the relationship between the two parties. Just as the Xiamen woman practiced in her own talk, online commenters also used the common folk category (with normative beliefs about their being in contemporary China and their relationship with the government officials) to question the government and criticize officials' conduct from a moral standpoint. In addition, it is also notable that some online commenters challenged this woman's self-claimed "common folk" identity and were willing to entertain an alternative image of the common folk as "qualified" and "able" in their cause of fighting against power abuse and oppression (instead of being overtly "submissive" and "obedient"). These two competing categorization of the common folk are intertwined and co-existing in Chinese public discourse. It illustrates an emerging change in Chinese people's perception and interpretation of what they are capable of in regard to protecting their rights and seeking social justice in the Internet era.

5.2 Citizen/公民/*Gongmin*

Although the category 公民/*gongmin* (citizen) did not appear in the Xiamen woman's interaction with city inspectors (nor in the Chinese lawyer's commentary on the local television station), online commenters invoked this membership category in their comments. Some commenters problematized the notion of "citizen" in the Chinese contexts, while others debated on the legitimacy of this woman's conduct as a Chinese citizen. More specifically, many online speakers considered this woman "a good citizen" who has not only civic awareness but also the ability to speak sensibly. In contrast, some commenters argued that this woman was actually a

“wicked citizen” who did not abide by the law. In this section, we will pay attention to these debates and discussions as a way to explore the online commenters’ interpretation of this membership category (i.e. what it means to be a “citizen” rather than a “common folk” or a “shitizen”) and their normative beliefs about “good citizens” in the Chinese context.

The notion of *citizenship* (and *citizen*) entered the Chinese context in the late nineteenth century under Western influence. Since then, not only was this term often talked about as an essentially western idea, the actual meaning of citizenship has also changed across Chinese history under the rule of different political authorities (Gold & Perry, 2002; Zarrow, 1997). This prompts the question of what meanings are assigned to this collective membership category in contemporary China. Focusing on online commenters’ use of this category in their talk provides a way to explore the culturally-situated and normative rendering about what it means to be “a citizen” for the Chinese, and their interpretation may be very different from what is stated in China’s official discourse.

In view of this question, one interesting observation emerged from the current analysis. That is, online commenters treated this “citizen” category as essentially something “foreign” to identify with, and problematized the use of this membership category in the Chinese context. As shown in Data Examples 5.7, all the commenters asserted in their comments that “citizens” do not exist in China. This assertion may sound very presumptuous, but what these commenters really found fault with is the lack of “citizen rights” (公民权利/*gongmin quanli*) and civic awareness (公民意识/*gongmin yishi*) in China. The speaker in C20, for example, raised the question of whether there had ever been “citizens” in China. This question itself was in fact rhetorical as the speaker was apparently trying to convey a negative answer to this question. In other words, the speaker implied in this comment that not just people in contemporary China

cannot be seen as “citizens” but also that “citizenship” (along with their political, legal, and civil rights as embedded in Western traditions) is some kind of ideal form of *being* that was never attained in China, not at present, nor in the past. Similarly, commenters in C21, C22, and C23 denied the appropriateness of labeling themselves as “citizens” of China but merely the “residents” or “tenants” in China. They suggested that the latter membership category might be more appropriate and fitting for them to identify with. The selection of “residents” over “citizens,” articulated in a sarcastic tone, becomes particularly revealing in response to the dispute between the Xiamen woman and city inspectors in the current case study. As we discussed at the beginning of this chapter, although this dispute was triggered by the Chinese woman’s flower stand outside of her house, there was also debate between both parties (as well as online comments) regarding who owns the house and more generally the land in China. These commenters’ emphasis on referencing themselves as “residents” can be seen as a discursive move to echo what this Xiamen woman was arguing for, that is, the protection of people’s private property rights and human rights. The term “resident” (居民/*jumin*) literally means “people who are living” (in China). It has more emphasis on the fact of someone living in a place, while “citizen” (no matter whether it is in Western political thought or the Chinese Constitution) means more than just someone living in China. Given its Western intellectual and political roots, the term “citizen” is more prominently associated with the political, economic, and civil rights than the location of their residence. By claiming their “resident” (and “tenant” in C23) identity in this case, these commenters lamented on the deprivation of rights from citizens in China. Therefore, when online commenters stated that there was no “citizen” in China, what they were really trying to problematize is these unattainable rights that a citizen is entitled to.

Data Examples 5.7

C20 我们的祖先都当过这个国家的公民? ? ?
All our ancestors had been citizens of this country???

C21 张总我们中国有公民吗? 身份证个个都是写着居民吧!
Boss Zhang do we have citizens in China? Isn't it that on everyone's national ID card it writes *resident*!

C22 我们的身份证上写的是居民, 我们没有公民的权利啊
On our national ID cards it wrote resident, we don't enjoy the rights of a citizen.

C23 你住这就是租的。果然我们并不是公民, 我们只是中国租民
(The house) you're living in is rented to you. As expected we are not really citizens, we are just China's tenants.

Despite those sarcastic and critical comments of “citizen status” in China, many online commenters categorized the Xiamen woman as a citizen. Her doughty and aggressive style as well as her sensible way of speaking won her not only millions of supporters on the Internet but also the ascribed membership of a “good citizen.” Interestingly, during her whole interaction with law enforcement officers, this woman did not refer to herself as a citizen but only a “common folk.” Nevertheless, as shown in the following Data Examples 5.8, all the commenters claimed (implicitly and explicitly) that this Xiamen woman was first and foremost a “citizen” and more importantly a “good and highly qualified citizen”. The speaker in C24, for example, marked the categorization of this woman as “a legendary citizen.” This discursive marking echoes with the claims made by commenters in C21-23 about the “non-existence” of citizens in China, and also cast the membership within “citizen” category as something unusual or spectacular and extraordinary. Furthermore, commenters from C25 to C30 also categorized this woman as a “good” and “true” citizen with high “qualities.” In their comments, these commenters specified these “qualities” (or categorical features) associated with the Chinese

woman's performance as "a good and true citizen" during her interaction with law enforcement officers. Commenters in C25, C26, and C27 all highlighted the woman's ability to reason, to speak truthfully and sensibly, to abide by the law, and to express their appeal through legal and non-violent means. Among these descriptors of "good citizens," "speaking sensibly" (讲道理 /*jiang daoli*) stands out as the most salient categorization of this woman (since it appeared in all the three comments). The Chinese expression "讲道理" (or speaking sensibly) can take on different meanings from one situation to another. It can be interpreted as a principle of respecting the truth and reasons in interaction, or as a particular way of speaking with sensibility and reasonability. In the current context, this woman's ability to reason, to speak truthfully, nonviolently, and forcefully in front of law enforcement officers was applauded by online commenters as the defining feature of "good citizens." In addition to this feature, "civic awareness" emerged as another critical characteristic that online commenters highlighted in their categorization of "highly qualified citizens" like this Xiamen woman. The speaker in C28, for example, noted that the woman (who was described as "doughty" in the original online video of her interaction with those officers) was not only a "doughty" citizen but also one with civic awareness. Followed by responses from commenters in C29 and C30, "civic awareness" was regarded as an essential and ideal qualification which only a small number of people in China can attain. This focus on civic awareness (which was defined by the speaker in C30 as "speaking sensibly, speaking the rule of law and human rights") was actually vague and flexible in the sense of what it really refers to. In this case study, for example, citizens' "civic awareness in China was manifested in this woman's knowledge of the law, her ability to defend her private property forcefully and sensibly in face of a large group of law enforcement officers.

Data Examples 5.8

C24 那什么，我先回味一下。这个大姐……是不是……就是……传说中的公民啊？
Well, let me ponder over for a while. This big sister...isn't she...exactly...the legendary citizen??

C25 鼓浪屿的大姐讲道理摆事实……是良好守法公民！
This big sister on Gulangyu island presented the facts and talked reasonably...(she) is a good citizen abiding by the law!

C26 真心为这位公民鼓掌也为城管和公安最后的撤离鼓掌在中国，合理表达真实诉求的权利以及对这一权利的尊重都太难得
I sincerely applauded for this citizen, as well as for city inspectors and policemen in China who eventually retreated; nowadays it is just so hard to see (people in China) exercising the right of reasonably expressing their true appeal as well as (government officials') respect of this right.

C27 一位普通的妇女的公民权益，真正的中国公民一个，中国需要这样不暴力但能讲理的公民，我为这位中国公民叫好
An ordinary woman's citizen rights, (she is) a true Chinese citizen, China needs such kind of citizens who are nonviolent and can speak sensibly, I applaud for this citizen of China.

C28 我想说中国各地要是都多有几个这么“彪悍”公民 中国就是需要这样有公民意识的人
I want to say if every place in China has a few “doughty” citizens (like her), China just needs this kind of person who has civil awareness.

→ C29 这个垃圾国度有几个这样合格的人类公民？中国只要有百分之一的人民具备这种公民素质

In this trashed nation how many qualified citizens of this kind do we have? Only if has the one percentage of the people in China this kind of citizen qualifications.

→ C30 这才是公民意识，赞！讲道理，讲法治，讲人权。

Only can this be called civic awareness, awesome! Speaking sensibly, speaking the rule of law and human rights.

While many online commenters lauded this woman as a “good exemplar” of citizens in contemporary China, other commenters questioned her conduct in this dispute from a moral-

legal perspective. Same as the commenters above, they casted this woman in the category of “citizen” but they challenged her “good citizen” membership by highlighting her moral defect, her violation of the law, and her bias against city inspectors. These commenters attempted to argue that being able to “speak sensibly” did not necessarily attribute to good practices of citizenship and that the Xiamen woman was not actually practicing “speaking sensibly.” In Data Examples 5.9, the speaker in C31 argued that this Xiamen woman lacked “civic virtues” even though she was capable of using the discourse of human rights to protect her personal interests. Similarly the speaker in C32 questioned this woman’s use of “human rights” in her dispute with law enforcement officers. Both commenters seemed to suggest that speaking of “human rights” in this context was inappropriate and illegitimate in that this woman was mainly using this discourse to serve her personal instead of communal interest. The “civic virtues” in C30, as well as the interests of her neighbors (as citizens) in C32, were brought up as a leverage to raise questions about the moral “goodness” and reasonableness of this woman’s practice of citizenship, which seemed to prioritize her personal interest over the “public” or the “communal interest.” This contrast was highlighted further in C33 when the speaker openly expressed a concern about the communal (or the societal) impact of this woman’s (as an individual) defiance of the law because of her personal bias against city inspectors. This speaker activated a larger frame within which the communal and societal implications of this woman’s bias and violation of the law were questioned.

Data Examples 5.9

C31 可惜她只知道拿人权社会来称道却忽视公民道德的基本内涵

It’s too bad that she only knew how to reason by referring to human rights but dismissed the basic connotations of civic virtues.

C32 南方一贯拉偏架 那举报叫城管来的邻居们就不是公民了? 就没人权了?
In the south, it's typical to mediate between two quarrelling parties with bias. So those neighbors ⁴⁵ who reported (unlawful acts) and called city inspectors to the site are not citizens? They don't have human rights?

C33 这样是不对的, 如果公民因为对城管有意见就不守法, 那么社会会怎样?
This is not right, if citizens defy the law because they bear a grudge against city inspectors, then what would (our) society be like?

The moral-legal perspective that all the commenters adopted in their comments to question the reasonableness of this woman's conduct implicates another defining feature of "citizen" and "citizenship" embedded in China's traditional political culture, that is, the intrinsic orientation to the "public" and "communal" (公/*gong*) in the practice of citizenship. As we discussed in Chapter Three, this social and communal aspects of *being* in the public realm was heavily emphasized in the writings of Chinese political philosophers and thinkers, such as the Confucian celebration of "public service" (Goldman & Perry, 2002) and Han Feizi's promotion of the "public people" over "private protégés" in feudal China (Chen, 2004). This contingency illustrates a historical conjuncture in understanding ordinary people's interpretation and practice of citizenship in contemporary China, especially regarding the moral dimension of defining citizens and their normative conduct. Traditional values such as "acting for the public or communal interests" (为公/*wei gong*) and "civic virtues" (公民道德/*gongmin daode*) still remain as crucial descriptors of the membership category "citizen" in Chinese public discourse.

⁴⁵ Since this woman's dispute with local law enforcement officers was heatedly debated within China (not just on the Internet but also in the "offline world"), there were a few follow-up investigations on this case being reported on local TV news and the Internet. According to some of them, it was said that this woman's neighbor actually found her flower stands outside her house blocking the traffic on the small island (a popular tourist destination in Xiamen city) so they reported it the local city inspectors.

In addition to these heated debates on whether this Chinese woman's conduct can actually be considered as the practice of "good citizenship," online commenters invoked a "progressive discourse" to interpret "citizenship" (manifested in the woman's conduct) and "law enforcement" (enacted by city inspectors) in contemporary China. The development of "civic awareness" (as discussed by commenters in C28-C30) was considered a defining feature of members of citizens like this Xiamen woman, but as commenters in C34 and C35 stated, the intertextuality of "human rights" in the woman's talk (although contested in Data Examples 5.9) illustrated an increasing consciousness about human rights in China. This kind of consciousness about "citizen rights" (such as human rights, private property rights, and freedom of speech) was typically associated with the membership category of "citizen" in online commenters' comments; and more importantly, citizens' consciousness about rights was regarded as a "quality" that separate "citizens" from "common folks" and "shitizens." In C36, the speaker portrayed the Chinese woman (although also a common folk) as someone who possessed this kind of consciousness and abilities which not only enabled her to protect her rights but also elevated her to be a member of "citizens." Similarly in C37, the speaker seemed to suggest a distinction between "citizens" and "shitizens" lies in a person's courage and ability to stand up and defend their rights. In other words, this enhanced awareness of civic rights and the ability to protect citizen rights, as demonstrated by this Xiamen woman, were characterized as "qualities" that separate "citizens" from "shitizens" as well as "the common folk."

Data Examples 5.10

C34 中国公民的人权意识提高了

Chinese citizens' awareness of human rights has risen up.

C35 厉害！中国公民！有两点，一中国公民的人权意识提高了；二城管执法有文明倾向，至少在录像里没看见打砸抢，都乖乖站着听课，最后灰溜溜地撤了，这是人民的力量！

Awesome! Chinese citizens! (There are) two points: first Chinese citizens' awareness of human rights has risen up; second city inspectors were likely practicing civil law enforcement, at least no one was beaten or robbed and nothing was smashed in the video (posted online), they all just stood there obediently listening to (this woman's) lecturing, and eventually retreated in dejection, this is the power of the people!

C36 姐们真威武有这等权利意识和文化素质，堪当中国老百姓的维权楷模，感谢她为我们上了一堂活色生香的公民维权示范课。

This sister is so powerful, (she) has such a high level of consciousness of rights and cultivation, (she is) absolutely a model for common folks in China to protect their rights. Thank her for delivering such a lively and real lesson (to common folks) about citizens' protecting their rights.

C37 中国需要这样的人 站出来 维护公民的权利，做公民(citizen)不做屁民(shitizen)! 有文化也很可怕！支持经典的公民雄辩，一张嘴巴轰走四部车。

China needs such kind of people, to stand up and protect citizens' rights. To be a citizen not a shitizen! Being knowledgeable is also quite powerful! (I) support this citizen's classical and eloquent arguments, (her) eloquence drove away four cars of (law enforcement officers).

Last but not least, a few online commenters also commented on the relationship between citizens and law enforcement offices in China. As shown in Data Examples 5.11, some commenters advocated for a somewhat “aggressive” interactional style for citizens to defend their rights in situations of problematic law enforcement (such as in the Xiamen woman's case). “Rights have been to fought for,” the speaker in C38 stated. It is interesting to note that the speaker associated this “consciousness of rights” with “citizens” – something that the common folk must cultivate in order to fight for their rights even if they are on the morally right side in a dispute with city inspectors. The prerequisite for this kind of successful rights protection, of course, depends on officers' lawful and humane conduct during law enforcement. But for

commenters in C38 and C39, this kind of “aggressive” attitude and interactional style (from the common folk in particular), is considered significant and effective for citizen-official relationship during law enforcement in China.

Data Examples 5.11

C38 有理也要声高 权利是要争取的:一 百姓一定要有公民权利意识 二 基层执法人员的底限 别祸害老百姓
(We) need to speak up loudly even if (we are) right, rights have been to fought for: first common folks must develop an awareness of citizen rights, second the bottom-line of law enforcement at the grass-root level is not to harm the common folks.

C39 这就是我们公民对待执法人员应有的态度~
This is indeed the attitude we citizens should have when confronted with law enforcement officers.

In summary, the declarations and contestations of this “citizen” category in the online comments in this case study lends support to Michael Keane’s (2011) observation that the notion of “citizenship” remains problematic in contemporary China. This problem is perhaps most significantly manifested in online commenters’ ultimate claim about China having no “citizens,” only “residents” and “tenant.” For these commenters, the term “citizen” still sounds an alien category for them to identify with (even two hundreds of years) not just because it was originally a foreign concept but more importantly because of their disillusion with the established Chinese political and legal systems in which citizens’ political, civil, and economic rights are not secured (as they are in the West). Nevertheless, some online commenters were more willing to entertain a progressive view on Chinese people’s ability to practice citizenship, especially concerning the protection of their economic, civic, and political rights. The “citizen” category, among all the six

categories discussed in this chapter, is most closely tied to this “rights talk;” and it is this close association that separates “citizens” from “shitizens” and “the common folk” in the online comments. The Xiamen woman in this case study, was regarded by many an online commenters as a “good model citizen” for the Chinese. These commenters’ categorization of this woman as a “good and highly qualified citizen” was based on two categorical features they associated with the term “citizen”—“speaking sensibly” and “civic awareness.” These two features are rendered as essential qualities of citizens in China in order to exercise and protect their rights, as this Xiamen woman demonstrated in her interaction with city inspectors. However, there are also online commenters who contested the categorization of this woman as a “good citizen” (even if she could speak sensibly) on the basis of her lack of “citizen virtues” and her acting for personal rather than communal interests. This contestation not only raised questions about the legitimacy and appropriateness of this woman’s conduct as a citizen in this case, but also alluded to another fundamental categorical feature of “citizens” in the Chinese context – that is, citizens’ moral obligations for “the public” (or communal). This moral and communal-oriented rendering of citizenship emerged as another significant finding of how people in China make sense of what it means to be a citizen. This categorization of “citizens” (as shown in these online comments) perfectly illustrated what (Jayysui, 1984) claimed in her study of the use of membership categories in society, that is, membership categorization is essentially a moral enterprise.

5.3 Shitizen/ 屁民 & P 民/*Pimin*

“Shitizen” is the least frequently used category among the six categories of citizenship we analyzed in this case study; nevertheless, online commenters invoked this term in their online comments to communicate a stance about what it means to be an ordinary Chinese, as well as a resistance to the government’s abuse of power in society. An interesting observation about the use of “shitizen” category that emerged from this case study concerns online commenters’ ascription of this membership to the Xiamen woman. As noted in previous discussions, the Chinese woman mostly identified herself as a member of the “common folk,” but some online commenters contested her self-claimed “common folk” identity. She was also talked about as a member of the “citizen” category and some even lauded her as a “model citizen.” Now we have online commenters label her as one of the “shitizens.” For instance, both commenters in C40 and C41 (see Data Examples 5.12 below) replaced “the common folk” with “shitizens” in their quotations of this Xiamen woman’s original speech. This change resulted in portraying the woman as a “shitizen” rather than a “common folk.” In a sense, these commenters treated these two categories as interchangeable in that common folks in China could easily be treated by government officials and law enforcement officers as “shitizens.” Categorizing this woman as a member of the “shitizen” group, they applauded for her quite unusual courage and ability to stand up (as a shitizen) against law enforcement officers. In other words, this kind of courage and ability to argue sensibly against law enforcement is not typically associated with “shitizens,” and thus this woman and her conduct were praised as something extraordinary for these commenters who themselves might be shitizens as well (e.g., the commenter in C42 and C43).

Data Examples 5.12

C40 有这阵容你去保护钓鱼岛啊，为什么来对付屁民？问得好！

You should go to protect Diaoyu Islands with such a lineup, why do you come to deal with shitizens? Good question!

C41 四车城管和武警对付屁民吗？？直接去收复钓鱼岛吧！

City inspectors and armed policemen filled up on four vehicles came to deal with shitizens?? Why don't you directly go to resume lost territory on Diaoyu islands!

C42 令我无限敬佩的智勇女士！p民们的骄傲啊！感动！！！！

This is an intelligent and brave woman I admire very much! (She is) the proud of shitizens! Touching!!!

C43 让天朝P民们佩服！

(She) let all the shitizens in the heaven (China) admire!

“Shitizens,” similar to “common folk”, is a category invoked by online commenters to convey a sense of disenfranchisement and powerlessness particularly in relation to China’s political conditions. Their identification with “shitizens” communicated a stance and a feeling of *being* an ordinary Chinese and was typically accompanied with their mocking and resistance of the authorities and their abuse of power (such as violent law enforcement). In C44 and C45, the online commenters noted a power imbalance in the relationship between “shitizens” and “government officials” (as well as law enforcement officers). In particular, they highlighted how easily the government can use its political and legislative power, in combination with their control over Chinese media, to suppress the discontent of the public and to propagate its own agenda. Within this political and media environment, the common folk can be easily framed as the wrong doers (if they stand in opposition to the government such as this Xiamen woman did) and be treated as shitizens. In C46, the speaker wittily expressed a critique of the government’s authoritarian power and of law enforcement officers’ power abuse by deliberately casting himself and other Chinese as “shitizens.” Speaking traditional Chinese with an ancient style, this

speaker portrayed “shitizens” as the equivalence of “the subjects under a feudal emperor” with the city inspectors as the “officials in court.” This mimicking (parody) of ancient speaking to invoke an emperor-subject relationship in a feudal China, along with the speaker’s self-claimed “shitizen” membership, functions as a political satire to convey a sense of powerless and disenfranchisement that defined people in contemporary China (such as the speaker) as “shitizens” rather than “citizens with rights.”

Data Examples 5.13

C44 官家的澄清。呵呵，都是百姓的错！就不能说点人话吗？人话就是，老子错了你这些屁民贱民能拿老子咋滴！

(This news program on the Xiamen local TV) is just for government officials to whitewash themselves. Hehe, everything is common folks’ fault! Can’t you (officials) say something with conscience and humanity? That is, even if I was wrong, what can you shitizens do!

C45...说白了，社保、法律什么的都不是用来维护我们这些屌丝屁民的
(omitted...) frankly speaking, social welfare, law, etc. are never intended to protect people like us, shitizens and losers.

C46 尔等刁民竟敢违抗圣意，妄论朝事，当今圣上的旨意，岂是我等屁民能揣测的？还不速速拿出房产证，不给就拆！

You, a flock of unruly people, how can you dare to say no to the imperial will, it’s presumptuous for you to comment on the court, what is the imperial will in the present court, is it something that shitizens like you and me can speculate? If you cannot show the registration certificate (of your house), your house will be demolished!

In brief summary, online commenters’ use of the “shitizen” category is closely tied to their perception, stance, and feelings about what it means to be an ordinary Chinese in view of the government’s authoritarian power manifested in all aspects of their social-political life. As we discussed in Chapter 3, the term “shitizen” itself communicates an inherently critical stance

toward government officials and the Chinese polity in general through this self-mockery label. In this sense, commenters' categorization of this woman as a member of the "shitizen" group can be interpreted as a strategic discursive move to highlight and lament on this enlarging gulf between the powerful government/officials and the powerless shitizens (same as the common folk). Viewed from her "shitizen" identity, this woman's actual behavior in front of law enforcement officers became extremely unusual, extraordinary and thus potentially highly applaudable. In addition, online commenters did not shy away from categorizing themselves as shitizens; on the contrary, they labeled themselves into the category of "shitizen" in order to foreground their sense of disfranchisement and powerless in Chinese society and their critical stance toward the government and officials' power abuse. For many online commenters, this "shitizen" membership seems to provide them with a playful while still powerful leverage through which they express their stronger disapproval and critique of the government and officials.

5.4 Netizen/网民/*Wangmin*

Netizens, the second least frequently used category in this case study, appeared only 102 times in all the online comments. Under scrutiny, one of the most salient features of this category concerns the "qualities" of "netizens" (e.g., rationality and intelligence) and the impact of their participatory role in the Chinese cyberspace. Online commenters whose comments supported the Xiamen woman's claims about human rights and the Diaoyu islands were categorized by other commenters as having "lack of intelligence and sensibility." This disparaging portrayal of "netizens" was, of course, challenged by some commenters who saw themselves members of this

group. This contestation of the defining feature of the “netizen” category revealed conflicting views on the online commenters’ “netizen” identity as well as the impact of netizens’ participation in public deliberation.

As shown in Data Examples 5.14, commenters in C47 and C48 categorized “netizens” as “retarded” and “unintelligent” for lacking the ability to reason things out. The speaker in C47, for example, labeled the Xiamen woman’s arguments about her ownership of the house and city inspectors protecting the Diaoyu islands as “crooked.” In addition, netizens’ intelligence and sensibility were questioned because of their support of this woman. Similarly, the speaker in C48 demonstrated the illegitimacy of this woman’s claim about the house she rented through an analogy of occupying a public park and then claiming the ownership. Through this analogy, the speaker wittily implied that netizens in support of this woman might not be able to smart enough to analyze the situation and engage in critical thinking. It can be argued that because of these commenters’ seemingly unwarranted support of this woman’s claims, online commenters were subjected to being categorized as not just “netizens” but more importantly the “retarded or unintelligent netizens.” In this sense, commenters’ stance toward this woman in this dispute with city inspectors was tied to the categorization of these commenters as “netizens” in a demeaning manner.

Data Examples 5.14

C47 网民 SB 不用解释，能不能先问下厦门人民的看法呢？租房久了就是你的，没这道理，人家和你说占道经营，你却要谈钓鱼岛，有此歪理？

Netizens are retarded, no need to explain, can’t you first ask how people in Xiamen think about this? There is no way to argue that if you rent a house long enough then the house will be your property, they (city inspectors) were talking about (you) doing stall business on the street, but you responded talking about Diaoyu islands, how can we allow such crooked arguments?

C48 评论太2了，中国网民智商堪忧啊。我家门口有个公园，我出去把它占了，你要赶我你就是侵犯人权，因为这片土地已经存在上亿年了，所以没有产权证，也不需要谁来认可，你有本事去抢钓鱼岛啊，欺负我。请大家支持我。

Comments here are too stupid, Chinese netizen's intelligence is of concern here. Say there's a park outside my house, I went out and claimed it mine, if you came and told me to leave then you've infringed upon my human rights, because this land (park) has been there for billions of years, so even if (I) don't have the registration certificate (of this park), I don't need anybody to approve, if you are capable enough, then you go to claim the Diaoyu islands, (don't) bully me. Everybody please support me.

C49 都不了解前因后果就直接把城管推到了对立面，网民太强大了

Not even knowing what actually happened and why it happened but just directly portrayed city inspectors as the opponent, netizens are very powerful.

C50 中国什么都缺，就是不缺傻逼和智障的网民。一看见城管就骂，觉得自己终于站到到的制高点的脑残网民才是中国最大的祸害

China is short of everything except stupid and retarded netizens. Once (they) saw city inspectors, they immediately started condemning them, these "brainless" netizens who ultimately think they're the ones on top are actually the biggest disaster in China.

C51 网民很病态，本质上这事 ZF 处理一点问题都没有。一：房子跟该女子没有半毛钱关系，借她住了 20 年，反而成她祖屋？二：至少处理事情很算很克制。唯一错的就是阵容以及专业知识不足。强弱对抗，网民经常会偏向弱势群体，而更得理智对待事实！

Netizens are very morbid, essentially the government did nothing wrong dealing with this dispute. First, this woman has nothing to do with this house which was lent to her for 20 years, then somehow it became her ancestral house? Second, at least (city inspectors) were still quite restrained during law enforcement. The only things they did poorly was their big lineup and their lack of professional knowledge. For any confrontation between the powerful and the weak, netizens are often partial to the weak, as such; they need to be more rational when they examine the facts concerning this dispute.

Furthermore, online commenters' quick alignment with this woman and their critical view of city inspectors and the government were also tied to a negative identity of "insensible and even morbid netizens". In C49, the speaker called out netizens' seemingly groundless opposition to city inspectors regarding this dispute, and labeled this group as "very powerful" in

terms of making this kind of quick and impetuous judgment about who was right and who was wrong in this whole case. This labeling of netizens as “too powerful” did not seem to function as an acclaim of netizens’ collective power but rather a dig at the “unreasonableness” of their unjustified opposition to city inspectors. Similarly, both commenters in C50 and C51 problematized netizens’ impetuous and unjustified antagonism against city inspectors and the government. These commenters’ criticism was not only directed at the “quality” of members in the “netizens” group but also at their participatory role in Chinese society, especially in regard to law enforcement and the relationship between the state and the people.

It is not clear whether the commenters in Data Examples 5.14 all considered themselves netizens, but it is interesting to see how they categorize other online commenters as “netizens” (and more importantly do so in a demeaning manner) based on the following clues: 1) their seemingly unwarranted support of this Chinese woman’s claims during the confrontation; and 2) their strong opposition to city inspectors as well as their critical view on the government. This categorization, as demonstrated by all the commenters, linked the category of “netizen” with negative categorical features such as being unintelligent and irrational. Not surprisingly, some online commenters challenged this extremely negative view of Chinese netizens.

All of the commenters in C52-C55 below, in one way or another, challenged other online commenters’ negative portrayal of “netizens” in Chinese society. They questioned this categorization of netizens as unintelligent and irrational while justifying netizens’ online reactions to this dispute between the Xiamen woman and law enforcement officers. More specifically, these commenters raised critical questions about the credibility of city inspectors, the guest lawyer, as well the host of a news program on Xiamen TV where this dispute was featured. In C52, for example, the speaker mocked the Xiamen TV’s partial and supportive

stance toward the city inspectors in this dispute with the Xiamen woman, and problematized this alliance between the media and the government. The local TV's involvement in this case was interpreted by the speaker as attempts to hide the "real facts" about this dispute from netizens, as well as to altercast netizens as unintelligent and lacking of critical thinking since they could be easily deceived. Commenters in C53 and C54, also contested the negative categorization of netizens as "irrational" and "credulous". It is interesting to see that both commenters who saw themselves as netizens refuted these negative "qualities" associated with the "netizen" category, not just by challenging the conduct of city inspectors during law enforcement and the credibility of the guest lawyer's remarks about netizens, but also by their engagement in critical thinking (e.g., the speaker in C53 implying the lack of transparency in city inspectors' law enforcement). On a similar note, the speaker in C55 provided an account (i.e. a justification) for netizens' overwhelmingly favorable stance toward the Xiamen woman in this dispute in order to deflect the negative categorization of "irrational netizens." Focusing on the local TV's partial stance in its report of the dispute, this speaker strategically reframed the kernel of the problem as a problem of the government and the media rather than Chinese netizens. In other words, the speaker suggested a new interpretation of netizens' quick judgment and supportive stance toward this woman, that is, netizens' reaction in this case was not because of them being irrational or lack of critical thinking, but rather because of this obvious public relations show put up on the local TV to give vocal support to city inspectors and the government.

Data Examples 5.15

C52 哦, 原来网民都是 2B, 厦门卫视, 谢谢你的提醒!

Oh, so netizens are all just stupid, Xiamen TV, thanks for your reminder!

C53 你们倒敢说你们城管会过于文明执法???????? 那么大的架势没有当场发飙心里窝火着吧 三个像猪头.狗头.鸡头一样不知道在掩盖什么? 辩护什么? 当我们网民什么都不懂吗!

How dare you say that you city inspectors are too polite during law enforcement???????? With such a big line up present but could do anything, (you) must be upset now, this three (i.e. the chief city inspector, the lawyer, and the anchor) on TV trying to hide something? Defend something? (They) acted in a way as if we netizens didn't know anything!

C54 “当一个平民女子面对着四五个城管执法人员”时。是四五个吗? “会不会被一些网民的不理性所反噬”。网民哪里不理性了? 作为法律工作者, 用这样的言词合适吗?

“When a civilian woman was confronted with four or five city inspectors during law enforcement, isn't (this phenomenon) being interpreted by netizens irrationally.” Were there just four or five (city inspectors)? How is it that netizens are irrational? As a legal professional, is it appropriate to say such things?

C55 厦门卫视 这次反应很迅速。期望网民的理智是不可能的, 但这个政府公关做得有点生硬。1、双方当事人并没有到场; 2、主持人倾向性太过明显; 3、嘉宾律师一句“城管执法过于文明”亮了

Xiamen TV responded swiftly this time. It's impossible to expect netizens to be rational, but this time the government public relations scheme was a bit farfetched. First, not both parties were invited on TV (to talk about this dispute); Second, the host's partial stance (toward city inspectors) was too obvious; and Third, the guest lawyer's remark of “city inspectors were too polite during law enforcement” caused too much a stir.

To sum up, the categorization of netizens is closely tied to a speaker's stance toward the Xiamen woman and city inspectors involved in this dispute. Online commenters whose comments were overwhelmingly supportive of this woman while remaining critical or even hostile toward the city inspectors (and the government) were subject to being labeled as a “netizen” by other commenters online in a demeaning manner. These commenters did not necessarily see themselves as members of the “netizen” category. Their categorization of other commenters as “irrational and/or unintelligent netizens” was a discursive move not only to attack netizens and the validity of their comments but also to raise a concern about netizens' (irrational)

participation in public deliberation as evidenced in this Xiamen woman's case (e.g., netizens' spreading and popularization of antagonism against city inspectors and government officials). For online commenters who did see themselves as members of the netizen group, this negative categorization of netizens as "irrational, unintelligent or lacking of critical thinking" was rejected. They communicated this rejection by resorting to several discursive moves, such as using irony, providing an account for netizens' reaction in this case, and raising questions about the reasonableness of city inspectors' conduct and the guest lawyer's remark about law enforcement in China. It can be argued that these commenters' (as netizens) refutation and their challenge of the authority and the media actually demonstrated their intelligence and their critical thinking ability. This contestation among online commenters illustrates that the membership category of "netizen" is not just a static term referring to people using the Internet in China, but more importantly a discursive resource for these commenters to construct a membership and identity, to participate in public deliberation, to communicate a stance and an attitude toward social issues (such as law enforcement), and to undermine others' comments on the Internet (by labeling them as "irrational netizens"). Moreover, this contestation may also show that the category of "netizen" is loosely defined and the communicative act of categorizing someone as a netizen may be very situation-dependent and fluid rather than being stable and fixed across contexts. As demonstrated in this case study, this categorization is closely related to the kind of argument and/or stance a speaker pushed forward in a social controversy rather than any essential feature of netizens being and acting in a certain way. Although a speaker's activation of an oppositional relationship between netizens and the ruling government may be considered by others a defining categorical feature to label this speaker a netizen (usually in a negative light), this categorical feature is not

accepted by commenters who see themselves as netizens in China in that their opposition to the government is considered as legitimate and reasonable.

5.5 The Fifty-Cent/五毛/*Wumao*

Complementary to the identity politics implicated in the categorization of “netizens,” online commenters whose posts were either clearly critical of this Xiamen woman or favoring city inspectors and the government were exposed to the risk of being labeled as a “fifty-cent”. This discursive practice of categorizing someone as a “fifty-cent” on the basis of their political stance and viewpoint presents a distinctive feature regarding people’s use of this category in the Chinese context. As shown in Data Examples 5.16, some commenters (such as in C56, C58, and C60) were labeled as a member of the “fifty-cent party” solely based on the content of their posts that either expressed as an alignment with the city inspectors (rather than the Xiamen woman) or attempted to offer “alternative facts” and/or a different interpretation of this dispute in contrast to what the majority of online commenters believed to be “the truth.” This kind of quick and simplified categorization of someone as a fifty-cent (see C57 and C59) may suggest that it is normative among online commenters (no matter whether they are labeling others or being labeled by others) to identify and relate to this particular membership category in the Chinese cyberspace. This normative characterization of the fifty-cent was further illustrated in C62 when the speaker claimed that anyone who speaks for the government is a fifty-cent. This rather extreme way of categorizing the fifty-cent not only projected a close partnership between “the fifty-cent” and the government, but also revealed an antagonistic relationship between the

government and people like this speaker who are not a fifty-cent. Within this antagonistic relationship between the people and the government, the fifty-cent on the Chinese Internet is oftentimes subject to political and moral denunciation because of their partnership with the government. That is to say, for any online speaker, once they are referred to as a member of the fifty-cent party, they are exposed to the risk of being collectively attacked by other commenters on the Internet. This happened in the current case study.

Data Examples 5.16

C56 自己违法还强词夺理，恶心.....

(You) violated the law but still tried to argue irrationally and reason fallaciously, disgusting.....

→C57 五毛

A Fifty-cent

C58 貌似被辟谣了。女子一家是钉子户，住的是林巧稚的故居，文物保护单位，别的户都已经搬走了，他家也不是林家后人。

It appears the rumor has been dispelled. This woman her whole family is a tartar, living in the former residence of Lin Qiaozhi, a place under preservation for its cultural heritage, other residents have all moved out, also his (her) family was not descended from the Lin family.

→C59 五毛

A Fifty-cent

C60 这体现了我们南方地区城管队伍的理智与克制

This shows the sensibility and restraints of the city inspector teams in our the South.

→C61 你五毛党？理智克制？110，武警，城管都出动，你以为他们不想动粗啊，不想就不会带那么多人来，09年动过一次粗，这次也想动，关键游客太多，没敢动而已，谁都看出来了！

You (are) a fifty-cent party member? Sensibility and restraints? 110 (the police), armed police, inspectors all came out, you thought they would not want to resort to force during law enforcement? If not, they wouldn't bring so many people here, in 2009 they had resorted to force once, so as this time, the key is that (this time) there were too many tourists around, they didn't dare, everyone can see that!

C62 为政府说话的都是群五毛党！如果她真占道，为何视频里还有人给她鼓掌称好！他们应该站城管那边，说服那个姑娘！

Whoever speaks for the government is a member of the fifty-cent party! If she really used the public space illegally, then why did people still applaud for her in the video! They should all support the city inspectors, to persuade that girl (that she was wrong)!

Online commenters did not just participate in the discursive practice of labeling other commenters as a fifty-cent but also enacted a collective moral and political attack on the prospective fifty-cent. Many online commenters were aware of the Chinese governments recruitment of the “fifty-cent party” members, as well as the infiltration of these members on the Internet. In response, these commenters called for a form of collective action against these commenters who were identified as the fifty-cent. While it is unlikely to know in reality whether these commenters who were identified as a fifty-cent were “authentic” fifty-cent members or not, they became targets against which the collective denunciation and attack were performed on the Internet. Based on these normative features of the “fifty-cent” we discussed above, online commenters identified the potential fifty-cent and then called for collective actions against these people. As shown in Data Examples 5.17, the speaker in C63 just drew everyone’s attention to the “fact” that some fifty-cent had posted a comment and called for a collective rather than just an individual or personal action against this potential fifty-cent. When it comes to how to deal with the fifty-cent in the cyberspace, there seem to be a moral orientation in online commenters’ approaches to the fifty-cent. In C64, C65 and C66, these commenters lashed out a moral critique of the fifty-cent by calling them “shameless.” This shame was associated with fifty-cent’s uncivil and immoral act of aligning with the powerful authority to suppress the people. The speaker in C65 particularly emphasized the responsibility of netizens in distinguishing the fifty-cent from

regular commenters on the Chinese Internet, while the speaker in C66 put more emphasis on fifty-cent's ignorance of the Chinese reality, implying that these people's partnership with the government was a betrayal to the rest living in China. Moreover, the speaker in C67 explicitly called the infiltration of the fifty-cent on the Internet a "traitor culture" and the fifty-cent's cooperation with the government as not only a betrayal of the people but also a representation of this "traitor" value. The language choice of a strong word—"traitor" (汉奸/*hanjian*) in C67 has both political and moral implications given how this term was used in historical times especially during the Sino-Japanese war from 1937-1945. Now these traitors are not assisting the Japanese government but the Chinese government to exert its control over China. This strong name-calling of "fifty-cent" as "traitors to China" indicated a deep divide within Chinese society concerning the relationship between the government and the people, and the fifty-cent became the target to be blamed, both politically and morally.

Data Examples 5.17

C63 评论里出现了五毛党。大家围攻之。

The fifty-cent party emerged in the comments. Let's besiege them.

C64 大伙不要暴粗，让无耻的五毛在文明的力量下跪倒吧

Everybody don't be violent, let the shameless fifty-cent prostrate themselves before the power of civilization.

C65 政府太强大了，它可以组织人力物力，可以协调公检法，可以主导舆论平台，以雇佣五毛砖家。正如薛明波所说的：网民要擦亮眼睛，认清谁是五毛谁更无耻

The government is so powerful, it can organize groups of people and other resources, it can negotiate with public security agencies, the procuratorate, and the court, it can dominate public opinion at different platforms by recruiting fifty-cent and experts. Just as what Xue Mingbo (the guest lawyer on the Xiamen TV show) said, netizens need to sharpen their eyes so that they can detect who's a fifty-cent and who is more ashamed.

C66 五毛滚出！！！！！你知道现在这社会是怎么样的嘛！
The fifty-cent fuck out!!!! Do you know what this society is like right now?

C67 网络五毛无处不在啊！当汉奸成为一种文化，一种价值观时，灭亡还远吗？
The fifty-cent is everywhere on the Internet! When being a traitor becomes a cultural trend, a value, is (China) still far away from perishing?

In view of many online commenters' "normative" categorization of the fifty-cent as someone who either fully supported the government (such as city inspectors in this case) or articulated a different perspective on current social issues in China, some commenters contested this "normative" rendering of this membership category. In Data Examples 5.18, commenters problematized this kind of hasty and even hostile labeling of the fifty-cent. The kernel of this problem, as the commenters in C69 and C70 noted, lies in this dichotomy between the "smart and thoughtful" (whose comments online commenters agree with) and the "fifty-cent" (whose comments online commenters disagree with) among commenters on the Internet. These commenters questioned the legitimacy of labeling someone as a fifty-cent because of them holding a different point view or having a different interpretation of social events. Particularly in C71, the speaker found fault in this superficial way of locating the fifty-cent on the Internet merely based on the content of someone's comment. Quite ironically, as the speaker contended, his comment was meant to mock the Party and the government but apparently other commenters reading that post did not get at this nuanced meaning and quickly named him a fifty-cent.

Data Examples 5.18

C68 五毛无处不在
Fifty-cent is everywhere

C69 不要人家一说点和你的观点不相符的实质内容就骂人家是五毛，你他妈是什么东西

Don't just curse anyone a fifty-cent once they said anything substantial that's slightly different from your point of view, what the fuck are you.

C70 顺我者有思想，逆我者五毛党啊。公知的反转剧好看

It is like whoever agrees with me will be a thoughtful and educated person, and whoever disagrees with me will be the fifty-cent. This is an interesting reversal drama by public intellectuals.

C71 你就是一脑残，我在讽刺共产党，你还说我是五毛，服了你。

You are just retarded, I was mocking the Communist Party, while you were still trying to label me a fifty-cent, how impressive (you are).

In Data Examples 5.18, these commenters not only objected to a misuse of the category to label anyone who disagrees, but also expressed a concern about the potential consequences due to this misuse. That is, a divisive and hostile environment may result from this discursive “othering” of the so-called fifty-cent on the Internet, and furthermore it may affect public deliberation and political participation in destructive ways. Many commenters are aware of this environment on the Internet and are cautious about how other commenters may interpret their posts or how they may be labeled as a fifty-cent by others. This consciousness and caution were reflected in these commenters’ discursive construction of online comments.

Data Examples 5.19

C72 对不起，我得当一次五毛称赞一下有良知的城管领导！

Sorry, I have to be a fifty-cent for once in order to commend the chief city inspector for his conscientiousness.

C73 知道事情来龙去脉以后。。。我又五毛了

After knowing the ins and outs of this dispute....I became a fifty-cent once again.

C74 我是五毛党。这件事是有组织有预谋的。包括那些武职人员也是花钱请来的。那有这么文明的武夫？哈哈哈，大笑三声。

I am a fifty-cent party member. This event was actually organized and premeditated, including those armed police men who were also paid by someone to show up. Where could you find such polite martial men? Hahaha, three loud laughs.

In Data Examples 5.19, the commenters explicitly claimed this “fifty-cent” party membership in their comments. Given the collective hostility against the fifty-cent on the Internet, it is quite unusual to see these commenters openly claimed this identity for themselves as they may be surrounded and attacked by other commenters. Nevertheless, this self-claimed membership of “a fifty-cent” can be interpreted as a strategic discursive move by these commenters to deflect others from assigning them this negative “real fifty-cent” identity and to gain credibility for what they were saying or arguing about this Xiamen woman’s case. If we look at the claims/arguments these commenters made following their self-disclosure of being a fifty-cent, we can see that all these commenters in C72-C74 offered a different perspective or viewpoint on this dispute between the Xiamen woman and city inspectors. That is to say, all these commenters were aware of the potential possibility of being labeled by others as a fifty-cent due to the unusual views expressed in their comments, but instead of defending their positions (like commenters in C69 and C71 did) through reasoning and critique, they chose to label themselves a fifty-cent to avoid others’ negative categorization of them as a “real” (and thus morally and political corrupted) fifty-cent. In this sense, this self-claimed “fifty-cent” actually functions as a disclaimer in these commenters’ posts online. The interactional meaning of this is that “I know you may label me as a fifty-cent, but the argument or claim I made in this comment is truthful and valid.” Here we can say that these commenters strategically invoked this

membership category in their comments, not to really claim a membership of the fifty-cent as suggested by the content of their comments, but rather to defend their position and the credibility of their viewpoint and argument.

Data Examples 5.20

C75 就这个微博我可以免费普及下常识。五毛们越是热闹，我就越有机会。希望五毛们都来反驳我。

In response to this Webo (microblogging post) I can popularize some common sense here. The more active the fifty-cent are, the better chance I have. Hoping all the fifty-cent come to retort me.

C76 五毛刷屏不可怕，反而是帮了忙。这样就有很多机会普及常识。感谢五毛！

It's not a bad thing at all to have all the fifty-cent flood the screen with their comments, but instead this is actually quite helpful. In this way there are many chances to popularize the common sense. Thanks to the fifty-cent!

C77 怎么不见五毛的 反扑！

Why don't see fifty-cent's counterattacks?

C78 五毛们，先和我谈一个问题：为什么当局让大家都觉得，和你们对骂是一件光荣的事？你们倒也给说法呀？大家都等了六十三年了！

The fifty-cent, first let's talk about one question: why is it that the current authorities makes everyone feel that quarreling with them is such a proud thing to do? Why don't you give an explanation? We all have waited for this for sixty three years!

Despite the typical response to “the fifty-cent” with hostility and even contempt on the Chinese Internet, some commenters were willing to entertain the possibly positive impacts of these government sponsored commenters online. As mentioned above, many Chinese are aware of this infiltration of “fifty-cent” on the Internet, but online commenters' reaction to the fifty-cent is not always as hostile or contemptuous as shown in Data Examples 5.17. In Data Examples 5.20, some commenters explicitly invited the fifty-cent party members to comment on

their posts. There was a mocking tone in these commenters' comments (which was quite common in most of the comments about the fifty-cent) asking for the fifty-cent to emerge on the Internet, but meanwhile it showed a different approach taken by these commenters to not just engage with these fifty-cent but more importantly to popularize their own viewpoints and perspectives. In this sense, calling on the fifty-cent specifically to comment on someone's post may be a deliberate strategy used by online commenters to disseminate their own perspective or worldview (i.e. the "common sense"). These commenters did not necessarily see the fifty-cent as a bad influence on public deliberation or political participation on the Internet, and they seemed to enjoy arguing and debating with the fifty-cent who were typically considered the spokesman (or the mouth piece) of the government (as the speaker in C78 indicated).

To sum up, online commenters' use of the "fifty-cent" category is absolutely multifaceted, playful, and contentious. To some extent, the categorization of the fifty-cent is parallel but opposite to that of netizens. Online commenters may be categorized by other commenters as a member of one of the two groups based on their political stance toward the government and city inspectors, their response to this Xiamen woman's conduct, and their interpretation of the whole dispute. While the categorization of netizens centered on the "qualities of netizens" in view of their seemingly groundless antagonism toward the government and city inspectors; online discussions about the "fifty-cent" focused on the identification and the moral and political denunciations against any potential fifty-cent party member. Any commenter whose comment conveyed an alignment with the government or city inspectors, attempted to provide a different interpretation of this dispute, or directly challenged this Xiamen woman and her conduct was subject to being labeled as a fifty-cent by others. Once identified, they were exposed to the risk of being politically and morally attacked. This common practice of categorizing a fifty-cent

among online commenters is essentially divisive. In the current case, a deep divide was created among online commenters (“the fifty-cent” vs. “the rest of commenters”) based on their divergent views of this dispute – whether they align themselves in their comments with the city inspectors or the Xiamen woman. This dichotomous and divisive categorization of online commenters as either the fifty-cent or the regular commenters was not always unproblematic. Some commenters challenged the validity of this common practice among online commenters to “detect” the under-cover fifty-cent on the Chinese Internet, noting the potential destructive effect of this kind of label practice on public deliberation and online participation. In addition to this more critical and even hostile attitude toward the fifty-cent, some commenters actively claimed this identity for themselves in order to promote their own viewpoints or arguments. In this situation, categorizing oneself as a fifty-cent performs the social function of a disclaimer. Simply put, by explicitly calling themselves the fifty-cent, these commenters intended to deflect other commenters from assigning them this negative identity of being a “real” fifty-cent recruited by the government. Once they were able to shake off this label of being “a real fifty-cent,” it would be unlikely for them to get attacked by other commenters simply because their comments suggested a different reading into this dispute or criticized the Xiamen woman. In other words, openly claiming this fifty-cent identity was intended by these commenters to work in their benefit, not just to avoid being collectively attacked on the Internet but also to persuade their online audiences about their truthful and valid comments. On a similar note, the category of fifty-cent was used in a playful manner by some commenters to attract more attention on the Internet so that they can spread their own viewpoints by engaging in heated discussions with the fifty-cent. The playfulness, contestations, and multifacetedness about the use of the “fifty-cent” category among Chinese online commenters exactly illustrated how a membership category can

function as a discursive resource for its users to accomplish social-political actions of various kinds, including but not limited to calling for political and moral sanctions, promoting one's viewpoints and arguments, and undermining others claims.

5.6 The People/人民/*Renmin*

Online commenters' use of "the people" category is very distinctive, compared to other membership categories discussed in this chapter. Unlike the contestation of categorical features associated with other terms, there is a consistency among online commenters with regard to the categorization of "the people." In addition, "the people" stands out from all these six categories in that it invokes a sense of collective power, moral and political supremacy within the Chinese polity. In Data Examples 5.21, all the commenters invoked the category "the people" as the ultimate "authority" to judge and evaluate the guest lawyer on the local TV show for her ambiguous remark that city inspectors in China were too polite during law enforcement. It is interesting to note that all these commenters asked this lawyer to apologize (in C79), to confess (in C80), to be judged (in C81), to be repudiated (in C82) and to be punished (in C83), all in the name of "the people." These commenters considered themselves a member of "the people" and thus they were entitled to do a "human flesh search" on this lawyer, to interrogate, to criticize, and to punish this lawyer in response to her seemingly pro-government (more specifically, pro-city inspectors) remark. Here claiming the membership in "the people" provides a legitimate pathway for online commenters to engage in collective actions (such as the popular online human flesh search), to openly evaluate and judge others' words and actions, to criticize and to

punish those who have acted against morality or the interests of the people. In this sense, there is a kind of supreme power associated with members of “the people” and the people are entitled to challenge and punish anyone who threatened this supremacy of the people (both at the political and moral levels).

Data Examples 5.21

C79 强烈建议网民对这个鸟律师进行人肉，要求向全国人民公开道
Strongly suggest netizens start a human flesh search on this shitty lawyer, and ask her to apologize to all the people in this country.

C80 那个五毛律师，我代表人民审问你，你向全国人民老实交代，你拿了当局多少钱？

That fifty-cent lawyer, I represent the people to interrogate you, you honestly confess to the people in this country, how much did you get paid from the authority?

C81 人肉这个律师。让陈女士一起来说说，人民自会有公理
Do a human flesh search on this lawyer. Let Ms Chen (the Xiamen woman) come (on the local TV show) and talk about this dispute, the people will acknowledge the truth.

C82 律师要有良知跟道德 这律师不配做一个律师 他站在了人民、站在了道德的对立面！

A lawyer should have conscience and morality, this lawyer doesn't deserve to be a lawyer, (s)he was in opposition to the people and the morality!

C83 视频中的女律师，人民群众在这里判决你死刑立即执行。。。.
To the female lawyer in the video, the masses here sentenced you to death, effective immediately...

While “the people,” the term itself, is associated with inherent collective power and supremacy (both moral and political), many online commenters are conscious about the vulnerability of the people in the Chinese context, especially when it comes to the rule of law and people's civil, economic, and political rights. In this dispute between the Xiamen woman

and city inspectors, a part of this dispute was about whether this woman actually owned the house she and her family had lived in for over 20 years. Many online commenters responded to this part of this controversy in allusion to the deprivation of people's rights and a lack of the rule of law in China (see Data Examples 5.22). In particular, online commenters focused on the government's long lasting political slogan of "serving the people" in their discussion about how ordinary people in China are treated by the government. All the commenters from C84-C87, in one way or another, brought up this slogan in their comments as an ideal form of the government-the people relationship against which the current government-people relationship is evaluated and criticized. The speaker in C84, for example, questioned the kind of master-servant relationship as indicated by this "serving the people" slogan. If the government civil servants are expected to serve the people, then the people are positioned as "the master." This kind of relation can be traced all the way back to China's traditional political culture and it remains as the ideal for many Chinese to make sense of their political status within the current system. In reality, however, it is not only that the people are not treated as "the master of nation" with civil, political, and economic rights, but also, as the speaker in C87 noted, that this slogan could be employed by the government to pay their lip service to these rights and the rule of law and meanwhile to perpetuate hegemony, exploitation, and oppression. What these commenters suggested through their use of "the people" category in Data Examples 5.21 and 5.22 was a conflicted image of the people in China. Online commenters, on the one hand, acknowledged that "the people" has inherent collective power and moral/political supremacy while, on the other hand, they also realized how easily the power of the people could be undermined by the government's authoritarian power. This categorization of "the people" with these two conflicting representations is not a question of *either-or* but rather of *both-and*. As such, online commenters

can invoke this category to openly judge, criticize, and punish remarks and actions that are considered “anti-people,” while they can also use this category to express their feelings of being disenfranchised and oppressed in relation to the ruling government.

Data Examples 5.22

C84 人民翻身得解放，人民当家做主人，主人没土地，也没家，～这是什么主人？
The people were freed and liberated, the people became the master of nation, (now that) the master has no land, no home, what kind of master is this?

C85 我就不明白了，人家 100 多年的房子！你 TM 说是你的 就成你的了？这是一群“为人民服务”的人，还是一群强盗？
I just cannot understand, the house has been theirs for over one hundred years! Suddenly it became your because you said so? Are they the people (supposedly) serving the people, or just a group of robbers?

C86 很多时候为人民服务都成了一句空号..很悲哀的说啊
Many times “serving the people” became just an empty slogan...very pathetic.

C87 中国一直在说自己是法制，人民社会，可普通人民哪有民权？为人民服务，都变成了比资本主义还恶心的剥削与压迫。
China has been declaring itself as a nation ruled by law, a nation of the people, but where are ordinary (the) people’s civil rights? Serving the people, has become a way to exploit and oppress that is more disgusting than capitalism.

Among all the six categories, “the people” is probably the one that is most frequently tied to the conduct of government officials or the ruling government in general. Similar to the comments in Data Example 5.22, this disapproving stance toward the government and city inspectors in particular was omnipresent in online commenters’ comments. In these comments, there was tension, anger, discontent, and antagonism. This antagonistic relationship between the government and the people emerged as a key feature in the use of “the people,” similar to the

antagonism between the government and the common folk. In Data Example 5.23, these commenters conveyed a sense of antagonism between the government and the people, especially considering city inspectors' questionable law enforcement in the Xiamen woman's case. Some commenters, such as the speaker in C88, blamed the Communist Party for directing the government in opposition to the people, while others (such as commenters in C89 and C90) focused specifically on the legitimacy of city inspectors and their notorious violent law enforcement that had been frequently exposed on the Internet in recent years. All these commenters suggested, in one way or another, that any government considering "the people" its enemy was politically illegitimate and morally unacceptable. Moreover, this antagonistic and even hostile relationship between the government and the people was highlighted by these commenters as a potential problem for the Party and the government. These commenters, as members of "the people," did not seem to be just complaining about this antagonism but also advising the government to reflect on its law enforcement.

Data Examples 5.23

C88 把政府推到人民的对立面，很危险啊!!! 我党怎么办哪

Pushing the government to the opposition of the people, very dangerous!!! What is my Party going to do.

C89 反思一下城管这个职能部门设立的初衷 难道是为了与人民为敌?

Reflect on the original intention of establishing this administration department of city inspectors, is it to act against the people as if they were the enemy?

C90 人民群众在他们眼里就是敌人就是敌对势力

The masses in their (city inspectors) view are the enemy, the hostile forces.

To sum up, “the people” is a distinctive membership category of citizenship in Chinese political discourse. It has an inherent meaning of collective power and moral and political supremacy which can be traced all the way back to ancient China and more prominently in modern China during Mao’s era. Because of its political and moral connotations, this category is used by online commenters in this case as a discursive resource to criticize, judge, and punish the female guest lawyer, city inspectors, and the government for their “anti-people” remarks and actions. Additionally, online commenters used this category to invoke an unfortunate political environment in contemporary China where people’s power, rights, and status were undermined by the government (such as the city inspectors in the Xiamen woman’s case). Last but not least, online commenters expressed their concerns about this antagonistic (and even hostile) relationship between the government and the people. Similar to the antagonism between the government and the common folk, here commenters’ highlight on this oppositional relationship could be interpreted as a moral critique of the government failing to fulfill its “serving the people” commitment (since “the people” were treated as “enemy”) as well as an indirect way to advise the government to rethink its relationship with the people.

5.7 Conclusion

All the six membership categories of citizenship are used in culturally distinctive and normative ways in the Xiamen woman’s case. Each of them is closely associated with categorical features that are deeply rooted in China’s historical, political, and cultural contexts. These features (such as the disadvantaged and powerless common folk, the “qualities” of netizens, and the collective power of the people) are constructed, negotiated, and contested

among online commenters and the Xiamen woman. Their interaction with these membership categories not only provides an insight to a situated understanding of how people in China interpret what it means to be an ordinary Chinese but also sheds light on normative beliefs about the relationship between the government and its people, especially when it comes to law enforcement.

Our analysis shows that the use of these categories (either by the Xiamen woman or by online commenters) is not concerned as much with identifying individuals as the “real or authentic” members of a category as casting people into a certain category so that a form of social-political action by (or against) these people is validated. The Xiamen woman, for example, by calling herself one of the common folk was able to portray herself as weak and being bullied while performing a moral critique of those law enforcement officers. Similarly, the categorization of “netizens” was only concentrated on commenters whose comments either challenged the Xiamen woman’s claims or aligned with city inspectors. Technically speaking all the online commenters are netizens (i.e. the Internet users), but this label of “netizen” is not just a neutral term used by online commenters to reference themselves or their fellow Internet users, especially in situations of heated online discussions on social and political issues in China. As shown in this study, online commenters cast their fellows into the category of “netizen” typically in a negative light, attempting to undermine the validity of their comments by referring to a social construction of “irrational netizens” deeply embedded in Chinese public discourse. In this sense, we can argue that these membership categories are rendered as a discursive resource for online commenters as well as the Xiamen woman to achieve their communicative goals and perform social actions of various kinds. These categories are typically invoked, discussed, and categorized in ways that are both cultural and rhetorical. It is a cultural practice in the sense that

categorical features linked up with these categories (e.g., the collective power of “the people”) are deeply embedded in China’s historical political culture; and meanwhile it is rhetorical in view of how these categories are strategically used and how certain features of a particular category are foregrounded (while others are dismissed) in order to achieve the users’ communicative goals (e.g., online commenters’ highlight of “irrational netizens”).

The use of these membership categories of citizenship also sheds light on normative beliefs about government-people relationship in contemporary China. These categories, although they are conceptualized as different interpretations of what it means to be an ordinary Chinese in the current era, are talked about in relation to the government, government officials (including law enforcement officers), and China’s political system. It is notable that the categorization of all of the six categories, in one way or another, problematizes the Chinese government, the present political conditions and the relationship between government officials and citizens. In particular, online commenters observed a growing antagonistic relationship between the government and the people in contemporary Chinese society, and they connected this kind of hostile relationship with all the categories. For instance, the ironic claim about China having no “citizens” but only “residents” or “tenants” was intended by commenters to lament the lack of political and economic rights for the Chinese to see themselves as a “citizen” in the same way as in the West. Moreover, for any online commenter, if their posts conveyed a supportive stance toward the government (or city inspectors in this case), they are subject to be labeled as a “traitor” fifty-cent or an irrational netizen because of this assumption about their hidden close tie with the government. This categorization, from a different angle, indicates an antagonistic relationship between the government and the majority of commenters on the Internet. Last but not least, the categorization of “the common folk” and “the people” revealed another normative belief about

regarding government officials as “parent officials” to fulfill their political and moral responsibilities for the people. This traditional cultural value about the role of government officials in a Confucian –feudal society was brought back in the current discussions about government-people relationships. It is considered an ideal form for this relationship, that is, government officials actively take their responsibility and serve the interests of the people.

Based on the analysis, we also see interesting similarities and differences regarding the categorization of all these categories. As mentioned above, all the categories are treated by online commenters as different in terms of their distinctive categorical features (e.g., the “rights talk” closely tied to the category of “citizen” rather than “shitizen” or “the common folk”) but some of them are also interchangeable. Generally speaking, the “common folk” category is distinctive because of its strong association with being disadvantaged, marginalized, and even oppressed within the present social, political, and economic hierarchy in China; and “the people” category has an inherent meaning about its collective power; but both categories are used interchangeably when online commenters allude to the moral power of the Chinese people who are typically considered as the innocent and morally superior. The fifty-cent, netizen, and shitzen, are all distinctive categories in terms of their recognizable categorical features (e.g., the “irrational netizens,” the passive “shitizens”, and the “traitor” fifty-cent), but all of them are used in a multifaceted, contentious, and playful manner. This similarity stands out as a particular feature of all these three categories in Chinese public discourse. Perhaps the most distinctive category in this study is the category of “citizen.” This strong association of citizens’ doing “rights talk” is something not typically found in the use of other categories. This may be an influence of Western political thoughts and theories in which the notion of “citizen” was

imported to China in late 19th century, and/or a response to the disfranchisement of the Chinese within contemporary political system in the country.

The contestation of these categories emerged as another salient feature of membership categorization in this case study. Online commenters contested on whether the Xiamen woman should be included in the group of underprivileged common folk, whether netizens are just irrational and unintelligent, and whether it is appropriate to label someone a fifty-cent merely based on the content of their comments, and so on. This finding lends support to the observation from previous studies about the contested nature of the Chinese Internet (Herold & Marolt, 2015; Yang, 2014). As Yang (2014, p. 142) noted, these contestations are “manifestations of the multiple ways of doing politics and being political.” In the current case, these membership categories provide a resource for online commenters as well as the Xiamen woman to be political in response to this dispute in particular and political issues in general (e.g., law enforcement). Moreover, if we consider these categories of citizenship as important political terms in the Chinese context, it is reasonable to claim that these terms are essentially contested. Boromisza-Habashi’s (2010) noted that essential contestation of political terms is not just about the meaning of these terms but more important a cultural practice of relating through the negotiation of boundaries of using these terms in social life. In this case, online commenters engaged in contestations over the appropriateness and legitimacy of labeling oneself or others as a member of a specific category and these contestations can be interpreted as a negotiation among online commenters regarding normative beliefs about citizenship and governance (especially government-people relationships) in contemporary China.

Our analysis of these membership categories also sheds light on why this Xiamen woman’s case aroused such a big stir in China. Individual and collective resistance in China has

been increasing over the last two decades (Cai, 2010) With the technological affordances of information and communication technologies; the Internet has become an indispensable tool for many individuals and groups to challenge the government, official conduct, and law enforcement in China. The Xiamen woman's public confrontation with city inspectors is one of these instances. It is something quite common on many of China's streets where civilians are confronted by city inspectors, but meanwhile there is something unusual and extraordinary about what this woman did. Her interactional style and rhetorical performance (i.e. logos, ethos, and pathos) made her stand out; and many online viewers of this video attributed her defeat of those officers to her communicative power of speaking well in that situation. Her conduct, no matter whether from the standpoint of the common folk (to which she identified with) or of the citizen and a shitizen, exceeded the normative expectation of how civilians interact with law enforcement officers and government officials in these situations. In response, many commenters lauded this woman as a "model citizen" for millions of common folks and shitizens in the cause of fighting for their rights. They saw this Xiamen woman and her communicative performance in this case a change in the practice of citizenship and government-people relationship in contemporary China. A detailed discussion about how this case study (along with the Zhou Jiugeng case) sheds light on our understanding of Internet-mediated social change in China will be presented in the final chapter. It concludes this dissertation project by pulling together common themes and differences emerging from these two cases, highlighting the implications of understanding social change through a micro analysis of membership categories, reflecting on theoretical and methodological limitations of the current investigation, and projecting possible directions for future research.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

In this final chapter, we bring together the two case studies, reflect on what we have learned about social change in contemporary China through our analysis of membership categories of citizenship in Chinese public discourse, and provide an answer to the research question raised in this dissertation project in light of the findings from the current investigation. To contribute to scholarly conversations about Internet-mediated social change in China, this chapter also discusses the implications of current research for the study of Chinese Internet; reflects on the theoretical and methodological framework; examines the limitations of the present study; and explores possible avenues for future research in the area of Chinese political communication (i.e. citizenship, political participation, and government-people relationship).

In what follows, I will first synthesize the two case studies (the Zhou Jiugeng Event and the Xiamen Woman Case) by highlighting the common themes as well as the particularities of each case. Focusing on the use of these six membership categories in Chinese public discourse, I will also explain how these two social events, despite their differences, complement each other and manifest changing notions and practices of citizenship and government-people relationship in China. This explanation is followed by restating the main findings from the two case studies and linking them with the historical discussion of these categories in Chapter 3. Drawing upon the historical analysis of these terms, I will discuss what are the new and/or emerging ways of categorizing people in China as “citizens” and what are changing normative beliefs about the

relationship between government and people as indicated by these new and/or emergent categorizations. In this section, I will also highlight some historical connections (or continuities) with culturally patterned ways of these membership categorizations in contemporary China. In light of these historical continuities and discontinuities, the next section will focus on the linkage between the micro and the macro in understanding social change. That is, what can the analysis of membership categories of citizenship in ordinary people's everyday talk tell us about the larger social-political processes of change in an increasingly wired China? To address this question, I argue from a communicative perspective which conceptualizes the six membership categories not as transparent political terms with static meanings but rather a discursive resource for people to construct a situated sense of *being, acting, relating, feeling, and dwelling* in response to the changing social-political and technological conditions in contemporary China. In this sense, social change is constituted and manifested through contestations and competing discourses about what it means to be a Chinese citizen and normative beliefs about government-people relationships. Following this tentative articulation of understanding social change through membership categorization analysis, I will explore possible contributions of this research to what Yang (2014) called "deep Internet Studies" concerning issues like "the contestation and fragmentation," "what's political," "online participation and collective actions" on the Chinese Internet. This exploration is followed by reflections on the theoretical and methodological framework adopted for this research, with a tentative discussion surrounding "a discourse approach" to the study of Internet-mediated social change in China. Last but not least, I will conclude this chapter by reflecting on the limitations of the current research (e.g., theoretical and methodological framework) and projecting avenues for future research (e.g., rethinking *citizenship* in contemporary China).

6.1 Synthesizing the Two Case Studies

In this section, I will first discuss the particularities of each case in terms of the central issue of concern (e.g., netizens human flesh search on corrupt officials vs. city inspectors' law enforcement) and online commenters' different reactions to these two events (e.g., cheering for the victory of netizens vs. cheering for the Xiamen woman—a “model citizen”). Secondly, I will illustrate how these two cases, from different angles, manifest a changing social contract between the Chinese government and citizens. As a concluding remark, I argue that this changing contract (i.e. a changing relationship between the government and the people), in both cases, is constituted and demonstrated through membership categorizing practices in which online commenters anticipated to express their situated sense of *being*, *acting*, *relating*, *feeling*, and *dwelling* in contemporary China.

6.1.1 The Zhou Jiugeng Event: Renrou Sousuo (RRSS) and Protest Against Government Officials

Zhou Jiugeng, Director of the Housing Department in Jiangning District, Nanjing, was sentenced to eleven years in prison after Chinese netizens started a human flesh search (or RRSS) on him, found potential evidence of his corruption (i.e. smoking expensive cigarettes and wearing expensive watches) and forwarded this evidence to the housing department. The unfolding of this whole event was unique and extraordinary, given Chinese netizens' involvement through RRSS and the Nanjing local government's swift response and decision, but

it was not just a singular or one-time occurrence. Herold (2011b) noted that Chinese netizens had initiated a number of RRSS against corrupt and criminal officials and based on the evidence produced by these human flesh searches, most of these officials either lost their position or had been arrested. Some of these most well-known cases, such as the Lin Jiaxiang event ⁴⁶ and the Deng Yujiao event ⁴⁷, were often cited in academic and public discourses as evidence of a changing China (facilitated by the Internet) in which netizens' spontaneous and collective actions succeed in punishing (local) government officials' misconduct (Herold & Marolt, 2011; Li, 2016; Link & Xiao, 2013a). Although it is still debatable whether these collective efforts will eventually be translated into long-term social-political change in China, there is a consensus among scholars about the potential of this kind of political human flesh search (or "human hunting") for targeting official misconduct at the local government level. That is, the rising of RRSS has been attributed to the changing Chinese social and political environments and a new social contract between the state and its citizens (Herold, 2011b; Li, 2016). As long as they are

⁴⁶ Lin Jiaxiang, the Party secretary of the Shenzhen marine affairs office, was accused of attempting to molest an 11-year old girl in a restaurant while Lin was drunk. When confronted by the little girl's parents, Lin shouted at the parents, "you people are like a fart, my rank is the same as your Mayor's." Accidentally, this interaction was caught on the restaurant's surveillance camera and was later posted on the Internet. Angered by Lin's remark, netizens started a human flesh search on him and eventually found out who he was. The central government took the incident very seriously and Lin was immediately sacked after this, although he was cleared of all criminal charges due to a lack of conclusive evidence.

⁴⁷ Deng Yujiao was a young worker at a foot massage center in a hotel in Hubei province. In 2009, when a group of officials were attempting to sexually assault her, she defended herself with a knife and accidentally killed one of the officials. Later she was charged with homicide after she called the police and gave herself up. After Deng's case was covered in national media, many netizens suspected that Deng was found guilty because the deceased official was a high rank official in the local government. So they took actions online. They started a RRSS to identify all the people involved in the assault and forced the police to start a proper investigation into Deng's case. In the end, Deng was released and the involved officials were punished (Herold, 2011b).

confined to local issues or the local officialdom, the Chinese government is more willing to tolerant these unorganized collective protests.

The Zhou Jiugeng case and Chinese netizens' participation through RRSS, although typically framed as a form of online collective protest, cannot be separated from the so-called "offline world" or the larger historical context in China. In his comparative study of collective protests in "online" and "offline" China, Li (2016) noted that RRSS (human flesh search) is a type of collective action linked to other offline forms of collective action (e.g., rural resistance and labor strikes) and it also has a linkage with historical incidents of bottom-up collective action in China. Also as Herold (2011b) observed, RRSS typically involves some offline participation in order to track down the targeted individual quickly. This interconnection between the "offline world" and the "online world," in the case of human flesh search, cannot be ignored.

It is not just that the Zhou Jiugeng case (and other similar incidents) and the happenings of RRSS that indicate a social-political change in China, but also that Chinese citizens' active participation in making sense of this transformation implicates the rise of a new political discourse in which normative beliefs about "citizenship" and "government/official-citizen" relationship are constructed, negotiated, and contested. The nature of the Zhou Jiugeng incident was essentially about citizens' collective protest against a corrupt official; and this protest unfolded most dramatically on the Internet. As such, the participation of Chinese netizens and their capability of creating social-political change emerged as a main theme in this case study. Although many online commenters celebrated Zhou's imprisonment as a victory for Chinese netizens as well as a symbolic milestone in the cause of combating corrupt officials, some remained doubtful about the extent to which this kind of unorganized collective actions (through RRSS) can eventually lead to social-political change in China. This kind of contestations was

also found in discussions about members of the other five categories of citizenship in terms of who they are and what they are capable of. In this sense, these contestations, as Herold (2011 b, p. 128) noted in his reflection on RRSS, suggest that the exact boundaries, rules, norms, and limitations of this new contract between the state and its citizens are still being negotiated rather than fixed or settled.

6.1.2 The Xiamen Woman Case: City Inspectors, Law Enforcement, and the “Model Citizen”

Differing from the Zhou Jiugeng Event which was clearly started on the Internet, the Xiamen woman case happened in real life (at Gulangyu island) and was later brought to the cyberspace where it made a big stir. This time, it was not the corrupt officials being targeted but instead a special kind of law enforcement officers in China who have gained a notorious reputation for their harsh and violent law enforcement in urban cities. This Chinese woman’s whole interaction with these city inspectors and fellow officers on site was, in many ways, extraordinary; but just as with the Zhou incident, it was not a singular and one time happening. On the Chinese *youku* website (www.youku.com), a search on “city inspector law enforcement” (城管执法/*chengguan zhifa*) produced hundreds of recordings of real life incidents in which civilians attempted to defend their rights (under the assumption that these officers might be illegally enforcing the law). They may not be as eloquent as the Xiamen woman, but their growing sense of civic, political, and economic rights is manifested in them taking actions to defend these rights, sometimes even resorting to violent collective actions. According to *Epoch Times* (<http://www.theepochtimes.com/n3/1475792-harsh-city-law-enforcers-draw-public-resentment/?sidebar=morein>), public resentment toward city inspectors in China has resulted in

an increase in civilians' violent actions against these officers in recent years. For instance, in February 24, 2013 when a group of city inspectors in Zhejiang beat a motorbike rider for an alleged traffic violation, over 1,000 onlookers were angered by the incident and some of them overturned a police car. With the access to the Internet on cell phones, any onlooker can potentially record occurrences of city inspectors' violent law enforcement and post it online. In fact, these widely circulated instances of city inspectors' violence against ordinary civilians caused great damage to the reputation of this administrative branch within the government structure, and the general public is getting increasingly angry toward its law enforcement in Chinese cities. Some citizens even called for an abolishment of this whole administrative section in order to get rid of all the city inspectors in China.

The Xiamen woman's case represents one of the recent incidents in which a citizen directly challenged the city inspectors' law enforcement in urban cities. This whole incident was not just about this woman acting on her own to defend her rights, but rather about a group of citizens (including the onlookers who were present at the scene) taking a collective action against these officers' controversial law enforcement by participating in this "surrounding gaze" or witnessing (围观/*weiguan*). According to the University of Hong Kong's China Media Project, surrounding gaze (or *weiguan*) refers to this notion of crowds of people gathering around some kind of public spectacle. This notion is deeply rooted in Chinese literature and culture, and frequently practiced on many of the streets in China where people gather, watch, listen, and "participate" in the unfolding of an incident in the public arena. With the affordances of ICTs, this phenomenon is now a common practice on the Chinese Internet, as suggested by this expression of "online surrounding gaze" (网络围观/*wangluo weiguan*). As Teng (2012) noted, the notion of *weiguan* in China today has been transformed into a synonym for active

participation (especially on the Internet), in contrast to what this term referred to in the past, such as the negative connotations of indifference and bleakness in the famous Chinese literary critic Lu Xun's writings. In light of this "surrounding gaze" in the Xiamen woman case, first from the "offline world" and then the Internet, onlookers and online commenters joined this woman for a public spectacle which pushed city inspectors and their law enforcement to the forefront for debate. These debates and contestations, similar to what we witnessed in the Zhou Jiugeng case, provided another angle through which we can explore Chinese people's interpretations of *citizenship* and a changing relationship with city inspectors (and government officials in general) in China's Internet era.

Many online commenters, as well as onlookers on the site, applauded this woman not only for her communicative maneuver to force these officers leave the scene in dejection, but also for the occurrence of this interaction between the woman (as a common folk, a shitizen, or a citizen) and city inspectors in real life. This incident was interpreted by online commenters as not just a reflection of the actual hardship and obstacles many ordinary people in China have to face in the cause of fighting for justice, but more importantly an indicator of progress of Chinese citizens' (either identified with "the common folk" or "shitizens") abilities to exert their rights as "citizens" in terms of making government officials (i.e. city inspectors in this case) more accountable for their conduct (i.e. law enforcement) through a communicative practice of "speaking sensibly." In this sense, the significance of the Xiamen woman's case is not just confined to her successful defense in front of a big lineup of law enforcement officers. It is also related to the symbolic meaning of this whole interaction, that is, ordinary citizens like this Xiamen woman are able to enact their right to express, their right to know, and their right to monitor officialdom, not just in the cyberspace (as Link and Xiao (2013) noted) but also in

China's "offline world." To many Chinese viewers, this incident indicated a social change, a progress in ordinary citizens to exert their entitled rights with the support of onlookers' surrounding gaze as well as the affordances of the Internet.

6.1.3 Two Cases, One Argument

The two incidents chosen for in this dissertation project provide two complementary case studies to explore Internet-mediated social change in China from the perspective of the Chinese themselves who are living through this changing social-contract between the government and its citizens. The Zhou Jiugeng case symbolizes a typical online collective protest against corrupt officials in contemporary China. It was started through RRSS on the Internet but generated real consequences in the so called "offline world" in China. The occurrence of this incident itself has often been interpreted as a representation of change in China's social and political environment (such as Li (2016) discussed in his comparative study of RRSS and rural protests in offline China), but key issues (such as netizens and the impact of their online participation) in contemporary Chinese politics also emerge as indispensable building blocks of China's online political talk. In contrast, the Xiamen woman's incident was an actual happening in real life; it did not start out in the cyberspace but was later moved to the online sphere. The "realness" of this incident definitely has a unique flavor in people's interpretation and reaction to this case, nevertheless, the "offline" and the "online" is perfectly matched in that the online interpretation observed in this study corresponds with how people in "offline China" respond to this happening (Xiong, 2014). As a complementary case to the Zhou Jiugeng incident, the Xiamen woman case provides an alternative perspective on how people in China make sense of what it means to be Chinese and how to relate to government officials (i.e. city inspectors), not just in China's

cyberspace that scholars have associated with extreme wildness (Herold & Marolts, 2011) but also in “offline China.”

Both cases, from different angles, highlight social–political problems and struggles that people in China are confronted with in the Internet era: officials’ corruption and power abuse in Zhou’s case and city inspectors’ violent law enforcement in the Xiamen woman’s case. Both cases demonstrate the involvement of netizens and the Internet (directly and indirectly) in aggregating concentrated public opinion and engaging in collective actions online. Both cases implicate a change in Chinese society in relation to how people conceive their membership in traditional and new categories of citizenship and how they negotiate with the Chinese government and officials to pursue social justice and to monitor official conduct in particular Chinese political, historical, social and technological contexts. Both cases, as I will elaborate in the following section, provide a window through which we develop a situated understanding about how people in China interpret and respond to this changing social-contract between the government and its citizens by engaging in distinctive while overlapping ways of categorizing themselves into different categories of citizenship and expressing their normative beliefs about government-people relationships in contemporary China. Through these membership categorization practices, the participants in these two cases (i.e. online commenters and the Xiamen woman) expressed their situated sense of *being* (a Chinese citizen), *acting* (against unjustified law enforcement and corrupt officials), *relating* (to the government, officials, and city inspectors), *feeling* (in response to their marginalization and disenfranchisement in society), and *dwelling* (in a single-party state).

6.2 Main Findings

In this section, I present the main findings from the two case studies, with a particular focus on the common patterns as well as distinctiveness in the use of the six membership categories (*the common folk*, *the people*, *citizen*, *netizen*, *shitizen*, and *the fifty-cent*). While comparing the analyses in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, this section serves another purpose: setting the stage for our discussion on historical continuities and discontinuities in the following section.

6.2.1 Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) of Six Categories of Citizenship

Table 6.1 and Table 6.2 provide a summary of the key findings from each case study. As we compare the two cases, it is notable that there are some common patterns as well as differences in the categorization of members within each category and in the pragmatic functions it accomplished. Below we will discuss each of the six categories, highlighting the similarities and differences regarding its usage across the two cases.

The Common Folk: This category appeared very frequently in the database for each case. Similar to Zhang's (2015) finding about how the common folk is typically portrayed in Chinese media, in both cases members of the "common folk" group were categorized as people who are economically, socially, and political marginalized and oppressed within the power hierarchy in China. They are constantly subject to exploitation, being fooled and even dehumanized by government officials. As such, the common folks are considered as not being on good terms with government officials. Online commenters and the Xiamen woman referred to their relationship with the government as adversarial, antagonistic, and even hostile. Foregrounding this "unhealthy" relationship, a difference emerged between the two cases regarding how common

folks should respond to this antagonism. In the Zhou Jiugeng case, the discussion focused more on the contestation of common folks' capability to change this power imbalance by resorting to radical revolutionary forces and the Internet; while in the Xiamen woman's case, commenters on the one hand complained about common folks being too obedient and submissive so that they had to rely on a moral appeal to government officials (as "parent officials") to fulfill their responsibilities and obligations to them, while on the other hand they envisioned the possibility for common folk to stand up and defend their rights (as the Xiamen woman did). In both cases, the "common folk" category was strategically invoked (especially by the Xiamen woman) to highlight members' marginalized and powerless positionality in Chinese society, to challenge officials conduct for violating the "parent official" norm, and to exert moral criticism and sanctions on government officials.

The People: The categorization of the people is relatively consistent in both case studies. Key categorical features, such as their "master of the nation" political status, collective power, moral and political superiority, appeared in online commenters' use of this category in both cases. Because of these "traits" of the people, they are endowed with this collective-moral power to monitor officials' conduct and press the government to be more accountable. If an official's conduct was questionable, like city inspectors' law enforcement in the Xiamen woman's case and Zhou's luxury lifestyle in the Zhou Jiugeng case, "the people" was the category online commenters used and identified with in order to criticize and exert their sanctions on those officials, and potentially to create social-political change. Also in both cases, online commenters were well aware of how easily the "political supremacy" of the people can be overturned and their collective power undermined by the government. So the expression of feelings of disenfranchisement and oppression appeared in the comments, as did online commenters'

mocking of the “master-servant” relationship in the official propaganda discourse and the construction of an antagonistic relationship between the people and government officials. In the Xiamen woman’s case, “serving the people” is still regarded the ideal and norm for government-people relationship in China, despite the fact that the current relationship in reality is actually antagonistic in nature; while in the Zhou Jiugeng case, the discussion was more heavily centered on the people’s capability to change the status quo, by resorting to either their collective moral power or collaboration with netizens.

Netizen: In both cases, online commenters constructed two dichotomous types of netizens to create a divide within the “netizen” group when there is a disagreement and to attack and undermine the opponent netizens’ comments or views. The two types of netizens –the rational, educated, and critical thinkers vs. the radical and unintelligent Internet mobs–were often played against each other by commenters to debate on key features associated with this category, such as the actual impact of netizens’ online participation. In other words, the identity politics surrounding “Chinese netizens” is closely tied to normative evaluations of netizens’ participation on the Internet–whether it contributes to concentrated public opinion and collective action for change or creates a problem through their radical and sometimes hateful messages. In addition to these common themes in the two cases, a difference can be found in the focal issue of concern among online commenters. In the Zhou Jiugeng case, the issue was mainly about whether netizens could use their collective online actions (e.g., RRSS and topping posts) to change the status quo in China; and there were three different “normative” interpretations of the efficacy of netizens’ actions. In contrast, online commenters in the Xiamen woman’s case were more concerned about netizens’ oppositional stance toward city inspectors and the Chinese

government. For many of the commenters, the “netizen” identity was normatively associated with their oppositional stance toward the government and officials on the Internet.

Shitizen: The use of this category is also relatively consistent across the two cases. In both analyses, “shitizen” was used by commenters to highlight China’s unfortunate political conditions as well as to express their strong feelings of disenfranchisement and powerlessness. Most commenters seemed comfortable labeling themselves and their fellows as members of the “shitizen” category for practical reasons, such as mocking the political establishment in China and the power imbalance between government officials (or law enforcement officers) and shitizens. In both cases, shitizens were typically perceived as politically passive and uninvolved in political participation, but some commenters communicated another normative belief about shitizens, that is, their “passive” actions like topping posts or witnessing online can function as a form of resistance and potentially make a difference.

Citizen: In both cases, “citizen” was regarded as an unattainable social imagination on the basis of the lack of citizen rights in China. Online commenters seem to be very aware of this mismatch between how citizens are talked about in China’s official discourse (i.e. being endowed with political, civil, and economic rights) and how citizens are like in reality (i.e., being deprived of citizen rights), nevertheless, some commenters are still willing to entertain the possibility of exerting their rights as citizens in both cases, but from different perspectives. In the Zhou Jiugeng case, commenters emphasized the facilitating role of the Internet in helping them foster a sense of citizenship through their online actions such as liking or topping posts. Online commenters recognized the limitations of these seemingly unimportant online actions, but they seem to believe in the collective power of these online activities to make a difference. In other words, participating in these online activities such as “witnessing” and “topping posts”

constitutes and enacts their citizenship for these online commenters as members of the citizen category. In the Xiamen woman's case, it is her "qualities" (e.g., civic awareness and speaking sensibly) that elevated her as a "model citizen" (although contested by other commenters) above others (more specifically the common folk, and shitizen, and other citizens). In this sense, the citizen membership is confined to "qualified individuals" (such as the Xiamen woman) who are able to "earn" their citizen rights under the current political condition through their performance of these qualities such as speaking sensibly and possessing civic awareness. In both cases, the practice of citizenship and the exertion of citizen rights were recognized by online commenters as very limited or even non-existing in a single-party state, but the majority of them engaged in constructing an ideal form of citizenship that is influenced by both Western democracies and China's traditional political culture. For instance, a public and moral orientation (为公/*weigong*), in both cases, is considered an important feature of "citizen" in the Chinese context.

The Fifty-Cent: The use of this category in both cases is strategic, playful, and multifaceted. Commenters seemed very aware of the ubiquitous lurking of the fifty-cent on the Chinese Internet. In response, they would normatively label anyone posting a comment in support of the government (or expressing a different view from the mainstream argument) as a fifty-cent, and then call for collective moral and political attack against the potential members in this category. The fifty-cent are typically portrayed in a negative light (e.g., as "traitors" and morally inferior), therefore, when a commenter is labeled as a member of this group based on the content of their posts online, that person will be attacked by other commenters. Nevertheless, we found that in both analyses some commenters deliberately claimed the "fifty-cent" identity for themselves in order to achieve their own communicative goals such as avoiding being labeled (and therefore attacked) by other commenters because of their different viewpoints, adding

credibility to their views, or stimulating public debates online in order to spread their own views. Although it is impossible to know whether the fifty-cent being called out online are actually the “real” fifty-cent, our analysis suggests that this membership category can be utilized as a powerful discursive device (as well as a communicative resource) for commenters either to sanction and undermine other commenters’ posts or to promote their own views on the Internet.

Table 6.1 Summary of membership categorization analysis in the Zhou Jiugeng case

Citizenship Categories	Members’ Categorical Features	Pragmatic Functions	Normative Assessment
(老)百姓 (Common Folk)	A powerless and marginalized group in Chinese society, constantly being exploited, oppressed, deceived, and dehumanized by government officials A hostile and adversarial relationship with officials	To highlight their marginalization and powerlessness To challenge the propagandized image of “parent officials” To exert moral sanctions on government officials	Common folks should use radical means (i.e. a revolution) to eliminate corruption in the government & to create a change; OR Common folks are just like shitizens, despite their use of the Internet, will not create any change
人民 (The People)	“Master of the nation”—a collective sense of moral and political superiority Government officials “serving the people”	To satirize and mock the “master-servant” relationship To construct an antagonistic government-people relationship	The people use their collective power & moral superiority to supervise the government and to make officials more accountable; OR The people can easily lose their supreme power and be treated like shitizens
网民 (Netizen)	The messengers of social justice who are rational & well-educated thinkers; OR Uneducated, radical, & overbearing “internet mobs” (<i>wangluo baomin</i>)	To highlight the participatory role of netizens on the Internet To construct a division within the netizen group when there is a disagreement	Netizens are powerful & independent actors exerting “Internet surveillance” on government officials through RRSS; OR Netizens can be easily taken advantage of and deceived by the government; OR

			Netizens can play a role in creating social change despite the limitations of their online action
屌/P 民 (Shitizen)	<p>Shitizens “witnessing” (<i>weiguan</i>) & “topping” posts (<i>dingtie</i>)</p> <p>China’s unfortunate political conditions</p>	To express their desperation and disillusion with established political system through self-mockery	<p>Shitizens are passive and can do nothing to create a change; OR</p> <p>Shitizens participate in online collective actions (e.g., RRSS) against corrupt officials</p>
公民 (Citizen)	<p>An unrealistic imagination & unobtainable reality but the affordances of the Internet facilitate a sense of citizens exercising their rights in China</p> <p>Acting for the “public good” rather than personal gratification (a public orientation)</p>	To reiterate the gulf between the ideal citizen with political rights and the restrained practice of citizen rights in reality	Citizens’ capacity of creating social change is limited but they can make a difference by taking actions online (e.g., liking or topping others’ posts)
五毛 (The Fifty-Cent)	<p>Overtly favorable stance toward CCP and the government</p> <p>The infiltration of the fifty-cent on the Internet</p> <p>Moral & political attacks against the potential fifty-cent</p> <p>Identifying the fifty-cent is subjective, strategic, and playful</p>	<p>To construct a peculiar (online) political environment infiltrated by the fifty-cent</p> <p>To solicit and confirm a united front against corrupt officials and the government</p> <p>To stimulate public debates and spread one’s comment or view</p>	The fifty-cent are not interested in making a change because of their beneficiary tie with the government

Table 6.2 Summary of membership categorization analysis in the Xiamen woman case

Citizenship Categories	Members' Categorical Features	Pragmatic Functions	Normative Assessment
(老)百姓 (Common Folk)	<p>The economically, socially, and politically marginalized and oppressed group in Chinese society;</p> <p>Being obedient and submissive in an antagonistic relationship with the government;</p> <p>Government officials (as “parent officials”) have moral obligations and responsibilities for the common folk</p>	<p>To strategically position oneself as poor, disadvantaged, and powerless in order to solicit sympathy and social support</p> <p>To altercast law enforcement officers as unreasonable and immoral</p>	<p>Common folks are more capable of defending their rights in contemporary China</p> <p>“Parent officials” taking care of the “common folk” is the normative way of relating to each other</p>
人民 (The People)	<p>The people have collective power, moral & political supremacy but that can be easily undermined by the government</p> <p>An antagonistic relationship with government officials</p>	<p>To criticize and punish “anti-people” remarks and conduct</p> <p>To express a feeling of being disenfranchised and oppressed</p>	<p>“Serving the people” is the normative ideal that should be upheld by government officials</p>
网民 (Netizen)	<p>The unintelligent, irrational, and unreasonable; OR</p> <p>The rational and critical thinkers</p>	<p>To attack other netizens and undermine their claims</p> <p>To challenge the negative portrayal of netizens and justify netizens’ online participation</p>	<p>An oppositional stance toward city inspectors and the government is considered as netizens’ normative conduct</p>
屁/P 民 (Shitizen)	<p>The political disenfranchised and oppressed in China</p> <p>Politically passive and uninvolved</p>	<p>To express feelings of disenfranchisement and powerlessness</p> <p>To foreground and mock the power imbalance between shitizens and law enforcement officers</p>	<p>Despite their passivity and un-involvement, Chinese shitizens can also resist</p>

公民 (Citizen)	The non-existence of citizens in China & the unattainable citizen rights	To mock on the deprivation of citizen rights To make sense of this Xiamen woman's practice of citizenship	"Good citizens" have civic awareness, civic virtue, and a "public orientation" in the actions they take; "Good citizens" are able to speak sensibly (and aggressively if necessary)
五毛 (The Fifty-Cent)	The fifty-cent is ubiquitous on the Internet The morally inferior and overtly supportive of the government	To identify potential "traitors" and then collectively denounce them To deflect others from assigning this negative identity to oneself and add credibility to one's comments To stimulate public debates and spread one's own views online	The normative conduct for the fifty-cent is to post comments online that are either pro-government or pro-city inspectors.

6.3 Linking the Historical and the Present

In this section, I incorporate the historical discussion of these categories of citizenship in Chapter 3 into the process of interpreting findings from the current research in order to dissect what is emerging (or changing) and what is consistent in relation to *citizenship* and *government-people* relationships in contemporary China.

As discussed in Chapter 3, all the six membership categories—*the common folk*, *the people*, *citizen*, *netizen*, *shitizen*, and *the fifty-cent*—are significant terms loaded with inherent meanings in the context of China's political culture. These meanings may be twisted, altered, and re-articulated in accordance with the larger social-political environment in China as well as the

user's specific political agenda at hand. In both cases, participants (either the Xiamen woman or online commenters) invoked the common folk category to perform social actions that serve their purposes by foregrounding certain features of the category (e.g., a sense of moral superiority, being innocent, weak or disadvantaged in the Xiamen woman's case). Notably, some of the categorical features associated with the "common folk" were re-activated by participants in their talk. These features focus particularly on members' powerless status in society and on the "parent officials" (another part of this relational pair – government officials and the people) role of government agents in fulfilling their obligation and responsibility for the common folk. Within this particular relationship, the common folk were typically perceived as passive, obedient and even overtly submissive. This kind of image of members in the common folk group is still relevant in online commenters' talk about this group nowadays (such as in the Xiamen woman's case), but now a new social imagination became possible for the Chinese—the common folk can stand up and defend their rights with the affordances of the Internet.

Normative beliefs about the political role of officials, as either "parent officials taking care of the "common folk" or "public servants" serving "the people" unveil another historical connection. These culturally normative conceptualizations of government-people relationships can be found in China's traditional political writings (e.g., Confucius' *Analects* and Mencius's *Mencius*) as well as in modern Chinese political theories (e.g., Sun Yat-sen's "The Three People's Principles" and Mao Zedong's "Serving the People"). These historical interpretations of "official-citizen relationship" were brought back into contemporary Chinese public discourse and remain as important categorical features associated with "the people" and "the common folk," particularly emphasizing the moral obligations and responsibilities toward members in these two groups. However, differing from how these normative beliefs were communicated to the general

public through the ruling state's propaganda discourse for the purpose of maintaining the existing power hierarchy, in the present two case studies, these normative ideas are invoked to perform a dual function—to *appeal to* government officials (and law enforcement officers) to fulfill their moral obligations and responsibilities for the people and to *collectively criticize and denounce* officials for breaking these normative expectations. This dual function, to some extent, can be seen as participants' response to an increasingly adversarial and antagonistic relationship between government officials and citizens in China.

This antagonistic and even hostile official-citizen relationship brings out another interesting contrast related to the category of “the people.” As we found in the current study, although “class” is no longer a significant defining feature of the six categories of citizenship (except some online commenters argued that the common folk are typically from a “working class” background), it served as a very important criterion (accompanied by another criterion-political ideology) against which a political division between “the people” and “the enemy” was constructed in Mao's era. Interestingly, this political division is still relevant in the online comments I analyzed, but instead of talking about “the people” in alignment with the government opposed to “the enemy” in the past, the rhetoric used in this research concerned how the government can be seen as “an enemy of the people” or how ordinary people in China (such as the common folk, the people, or netizens) can be demonized as “the enemy” by the government when they voiced their discontent or resistance against the regime.

The Chinese term *gongmin* (公民/citizen), as we discussed in Chapter 3, is typically considered as the Chinese equivalent of the English term “citizen,” despite its strong association with a “public orientation” or the “public people” in ancient China (Goldman & Perry, 2002; Nuyen, 2002). This traditional rendering of “citizens” remains a categorical feature of the

“citizen” category in contemporary China. In both cases, online commenters challenged others’ “citizen identity” or “citizen acts” based on to whom their actions were intended to benefit. For example, in the Xiamen woman’s case, the woman was not considered a “(good) citizen” because in her defense of rights she did not take into consideration the communal interests. Similarly, online commenters problematized the comments of those “radical, unintelligent, and extreme netizens” (or Internet mobs) for they seemed to be obsessed only with their selfish desires (e.g., to vent out, to make a stir) but not with the public or communal interests (e.g., allowing others to express their different viewpoints). Additionally, the emphasis on citizens’ “moral qualifications” in the current research resonates with what Keane (2001) observed about the importance of “civic virtue” in defining “citizens,” that is, a moral component being incorporated by government leaders and political elites into the notion and practice of citizenship in the context of the Chinese market economy. In the Xiamen woman’s case, for example, the woman was applauded as a “good citizen” by some commenters because she was non-violent and speaking sensibly during her interaction with city inspectors.

Other membership categories (*netizen*, *shitizen*, and *the fifty-cent*) emerged in Chinese public discourse within the last ten years. These terms have not yet had a long history, but they represent another significant dimension of emerging notions and practices of citizenship in Chinese public discourse in the Internet era. In view of our discussions of these terms in Chapter 3 and findings in the current research, it is notable that all the three categories have been increasingly politicized (in both playful and serious ways) and that they have been increasingly used in fluid and multifaceted ways to accomplish different kinds of social actions. For online commenters to label someone as a member of any of the three categories, their main purpose seems to be about fulfilling their own communicative goals (e.g., undermining the argument put

forward in a fifty-cent post, adding credibility to their own views, etc.) rather than to identify the actual “real” members in these categories on the Internet.

6.4 Membership Categories, Contestations, Competing Discourses, and Social Change

The main objective of this section is to provide a tentative answer to the research question of this dissertation project: How do people in China make sense of Internet-mediated social change in the areas of *citizenship* and *government-citizen relationships*? To answer this question, I start from a communicative perspective that conceptualizes membership categories appearing in this research, not as political terms with static and transparent meanings but rather a discursive resource for people to construct a situated sense of *being, acting, relating, feeling, and dwelling* in response to the changing social-political and technological conditions in contemporary China. Moreover, this communicative perspective highlights the role of communication in constituting, not just reflecting, social change. Put differently, how it is that new notions and norms for communication in Chinese public discourse become part of social change.

The existence of multiple membership categories of citizenship in Chinese public discourse (as well as their availability to ordinary people) evidences a change in Chinese society. Traditional categories such as *the common folk*, *the people*, and *citizen* are twisted with a different meaning by their users to construct a collective national identity and to implicate a normative government-people relationship; while the appearance of new membership categories

such as *netizen*, *shitizen*, and *the fifty-cent* suggests a societal change resulting from the influence of the Chinese Internet culture. Whether it is about playing with these new categories in multifaceted ways or about articulating a new interpretation of “old” categories, people’s use of these categories shows how fluid and loosely defined they are in the Chinese context. Some categories are deemed interchangeable with others while some are deliberately separated from one another. By identifying with one category instead of the other, people in China can participate in a collective sense of relating to each other and to the ruling government. In response to this changing social contract between government and people (deLisle, Goldstein, & Yang, 2016; Herold & Marolt, 2011, 2015; Lagerkvist, 2010), these membership categories provide an invaluable discursive resource for the Chinese to express their situated sense of and normative beliefs about what it means to be a Chinese (*being*), how to relate to the ruling government and officials (*relating*), how to conduct themselves as a member of a certain category (*acting*), how they feel about being a member in a certain category (*feeling*), and how they respond to the larger social-political and technological environment in contemporary China (*dwelling*).

As we discussed in the analysis chapters, these membership categories are essentially contested in Chinese public discourse, concerning not only the use of these categories but also the communicated normative beliefs about the “good practice” of citizenship for members in a specific category and members’ capability of creating social change. Most of the contestations unveiled two competing discourses that co-exist in the current Chinese context. For instance, online commenters contested the “normative” categorical features associated with particular categories such as “netizens.” The two competing views on who are netizens and what is the effect of their online participation produced two constructions of the netizen group – as *Internet*

mobs or *rational thinkers*. These two conflicted renderings of the same category co-exist in Chinese public discourse, which reveals a negotiation among people in China about their political identities in a changing environment and their existence in relation to the government and the larger social-political and technological contexts in the Internet era. In this sense, social change is constituted and manifested through contestations and competing discourses about what it means to be a Chinese citizen and normative beliefs about government-people relationships.

Craig (2013) noted that meta-discourse serves as a medium through which competing discourses are articulated, debated, compromised, and/or rejected. In this process, social change occurs as new meanings and norms for communication emerged from public discourse. In light of this insight on the connection between meta-discourse and social change, findings in the current research shed light on another dimension of social change in contemporary China, that is, a communication orientation emerges as a normative expectation for “good practice” of citizenship and “good relationship” between government and people during law enforcement. This orientation was explicitly commented on in the Xiamen woman’s case. In the interaction with city inspectors and other officers in front of her house, the Xiamen woman asked those officers several times to “speak sensibly” (讲道理/*jiang daoli*)—a culturally normative way of speaking in Chinese social interactions that respects truth, reason, human feelings and sensibilities for all the parties involved in a particular situation. In this case, the woman was asking those officers to respect the law and the truth (that she owned this house) and to acknowledge the inappropriateness of their law enforcement (i.e. coming to a common folk’s home). From her point of view, law enforcement officers should be able to speak sensibly in order to communicate well with civilians when they do their job of enforcing the law in a civil manner that upholds citizens’ human rights in China. This more “communicative” orientation in

officers' law enforcement is also considered a good alternative to the violence that has been frequently witnessed in city inspectors' law enforcement across China in recent years. Moreover, online commenters attributed city inspectors' defeat in their confrontation with the Chinese woman to their lack of communicative competence. They noticed that those officers were not able to cite the law to justify their law enforcing conduct, nor were able to refute any of the assertions the woman made, such as city inspectors should go to the Diaoyu islands fighting against the Japanese. In contrast, the Chinese woman was lauded by the majority of commenters on the Internet who were deeply impressed with her "sensible talk" to confront those officers and lecture on them. As we discussed in Chapter 5, her ability of "speaking sensibly" (along with her knowledge of law) was interpreted as a strong indicator of her membership of "good citizens." In other words, "speaking sensibly" is an essential feature of the "citizen" category and more important a normative expectation of the practice of "good citizens."

6.5 Joining Intellectual Conversations & The Study of Chinese Internet

The linkage between the rise of the Internet and social-political change in China has been widely explored in the current scholarship of Chinese Internet studies (Cai, 2010; deLisle, Goldstein, & Yang, 2016; Herold & Marolt, 2011; Lagerkvist, 2010; Liu, 2011; Yang, 2009). Moving beyond early dichotomous interpretations of the impact of the Internet on Chinese society—as either “promoting democracy” or “strengthening authoritarianism,” recently research has illustrated, through empirical investigations, how multifaceted and dynamic the Chinese Internet is and how complex and multidimensional its influence on Chinese society can be (deLisle, Goldstein, & Yang, 2016; Herold & Marolts, 2011; Yang, 2012, 2014). For instance,

Yang (2012, 2014) discussed the important features of Chinese Internet based on his review of current scholarship, such as lightness, wildness, ambivalence, entertainment, control, and contention. Particularly, Yang called for more attention paid to political contestation in Chinese digital spaces as a pathway to carry out “deep Internet studies” (Yang, 2014, p.135) that “explore the Internet as a facet of a deep China by linking it to people’s practical, perceptual, and moral experiences as well as to the contexts of institutions, politics, and policies.”

The online contestations, as I captured in this dissertation, shed light on a deep and situated understanding of China in relation to people’s use of the Internet. These contestations, ranging from netizens’ ability of creating social-political change to the Xiamen woman’s self-claimed common folk identity, not just demonstrate how dynamic and fluid (and fragmented as well) the contestation is on the Chinese Internet, but more importantly indicate a process of transformation in Chinese society with regard to ordinary people’s (new) interpretation of citizenship and normative beliefs about government-people relationships in the Internet era.

This research also offers insight into the current intellectual conversation about “political actions” on the Chinese Internet. As Yang (2014, p. 136) noted, dichotomous analytical categories such as politics vs. entertainment, are frequently adopted by researchers to interpret the “content” of the Internet in China at the expense of meaning and people. The danger of using this dichotomous analytical category is further explained by Yang (2009, pp. 1-2),

Media stories and survey reports have perpetuated two misleading images of the Chinese Internet: one of control and the other of entertainment. These two images create the misconception that because of government Internet control, Chinese Internet users do nothing but play. The real struggles of the Chinese people are thus ignored, and the radical nature of Chinese Internet culture is dismissed. Yet, not only is Internet entertainment not apolitical, but political control itself is an arena of struggle [...] The most unorthodox, imaginative, and subversive ideas can be found in Chinese cyberspace. Authority of all kinds is subject to doubt and ridicule. Ordinary people engage in a broad range of political action and find a new sense of self, community, and empowerment.

It is important to acknowledge that light, entertaining, and playful content is pervasive on the Chinese Internet, but it is more important to explore these seemingly “non-political” digital spaces that have become an important avenue for political debate and political action (Wright, et. al., 2016). As Yang (2009) contended, these seemingly apolitical expressions are actually the “authentic” expression of people’s political struggle in China’s cyberspace under the control of the ruling government. In the present study, online commenters’ discourse practices of categorizing their fellow Chinese on the Internet, government officials, and city inspectors illustrate how their seemingly playful act such as calling themselves a fifty-cent can take on a political meaning for themselves or help them to achieve their political agenda. For any kind of “deep Internet studies,” it is important to analyze not just the content of what was said on the Internet but what people are doing by saying what they say. For instance, by openly claiming a “citizen” identity, a commenter can communicate a critical political stance toward the government by foregrounding their sense of disenfranchisement and oppression in contemporary China.

Last but not least, the wide range of political stances and online actions we documented through the analysis of six membership categories shows how diverse, critical, and contentious the Internet is, and its meaningfulness in Chinese society. This study can be seen as one of the “deep Internet studies” that Yang (2014) called for. In view of this widely-shared assumptions about the Chinese government’s tight control of political expression on the Internet, the current research shows otherwise. In support of the observation in Link and Xiao (2013) that Chinese people now can explore alternative answers to questions of identity through their interaction with the Internet, we found that both these alternatives were manifested in ordinary people’s

interaction with government officials (e.g., the Xiamen woman and law enforcement officers) and with their fellow Chinese. These explorations go well beyond the construction of a collective “citizen” identity and extend to negotiating with the ruling government in terms of normative beliefs about the government-people relationship and fair/just law enforcement.

6.6 Theoretical & Methodological Reflection: Membership Categorization

Analysis

A discourse approach is considered highly productive in dissecting and analyzing political talk in contemporary China in view of a changing media landscape and the penetration of the Internet and social media platforms in society (Cao, Tian, & Chilton, 2014; Wright, et. al., 2016). As these scholars noted, everyday online political talk in China is particularly interesting to study because “the mix of politics with market and the unique Chinese culture has created a multifaceted Internet (Chen & Reese, 2015, p.1); but meanwhile it also poses a great challenge for researchers to analyze this everyday political talk in China due to online censorship, Internet users’ self-censorship, and the complexity of the talk itself.

Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) (Sacks, 1992) proves to be a useful framework, as shown in this study, to unpack different layers of meanings associated with membership categories of citizenship. The indeterminacy of these categories becomes a great asset for people in China to navigate webs of meanings related to who they are and how they relate to government officials. They provide a discursive resource for them to accomplish their communicative goals in particular situations. Focusing on people’s use of these categories in

their everyday talk (both online and offline) at the micro level, MCA sheds great light on the meaning-making process through which political stances are communicated, political actions are performed, and political relationships (e.g., government-people) are reframed, re-negotiated, and subverted. Doing MCA, although the focal point of analysis is around membership categories, enables this research to link specific discourse practices with larger societal implications, such as the construction of competing social norms regarding proper conduct of members in a certain category (e.g., speaking sensibly as a normative conduct for “good citizens” and competent “law enforcement officers”) and the moral sanction of members in a certain category by invoking these normative standards (e.g., moral sanctions on corrupt officials for failing to act like “parent officials”). Furthermore, membership categories themselves can be seen as socially constructed and this social categorization plays an important role in developing situated knowledge about members’ (of each category) social positioning and in analyzing citizenship as a communicative achievement (Ivanyi, et al., 2006). The construction of social categories is manifested in (un)tying them with certain normative categorical features and activities, negotiating and contesting on these features. As in the current research, our MCA analyses illustrate how citizenship and government-people relationship are constituted, negotiated, and contested in and through people’s social categorization of citizenship categories.

Last but not least, MCA can help researchers avoid using pre-existing dichotomous analytical categories that have been seen as obstacles to developing a deep analysis of the Chinese Internet (Yang, 2009, 2014). Seeing each category as a discursive resource rather than a static terminology with relatively transparent meanings, MCA offers an interesting way to explore the multifacetedness and dynamics of each category—as how it is used in people’s everyday talk—in terms of defining categorical features, pragmatic functions (e.g., identity work,

social-political actions), and the larger socio-cultural and political contexts. Seeing these categories as a discursive resource, we are now capable of making nuanced arguments about how the Internet is changing China. One argument, as shown by this study, concerns people's use of citizenship categories – it is through their use of these categories that we caught a glimpse of new interpretations of what it means to be an ordinary Chinese and how they negotiate this changing social contract with the government in China's Internet era.

6.7 Limitations and Future Research

6.7.1 Limitations

There are at least three limitations in this research. First, given our interest in exploring Internet-mediated social change in contemporary China in relation to the practice of citizenship and government-people relationships, it would be ideal if we compiled data from sources that enable us to detect transformations in Chinese society both vertically and horizontally. Although we attempted to include a chapter (Chapter 3) in this dissertation that specifically addresses the historical evolution of the six membership categories we focused on, it would be ideal if we had access to a data corpus consisting of Chinese public discourse from 1980s to the present.

Secondly, we provided two case studies in this research, but to what extent are these two cases representative of various kinds of incidents in the public domain (both online and offline)? These two cases are chosen as sources of data collection, partly because of their prominence in Chinese society, but this prominence may not always result in valid and legitimate data samples for the current research. Lastly but not least, the theoretical and methodological framework adopted in this study could be further strengthened by linking membership category analysis,

(especially regarding its link to culture and normative conduct) with other theoretical perspectives such as speech code theory (Philipsen, Coutu, & Covarrubias, 2005) or cultural discourse analysis (Carbaugh, 2005, 2007). This combination would allow me to further explore the cultural dimension of communication intertwined with the use of membership categories in Chinese public discourse.

6.7.2 Future Research

Three possible avenues for future research are discussed here. First, to rethink and re-articulate “citizenship” in contemporary Chinese society would be a promising research topic for further exploration. Based on the findings from the current project, it is clearly demonstrated that traditional Chinese categories of citizenship have taken on different layers of political meanings and emergent categories such as “shitizen” and “netizen” increasingly resonate with many people in China. The rising of these notions of citizenship from Chinese cyberspace to the whole society raises interesting questions about how collective identities, connective actions, and the linkage between the personal and the political are constructed, contested, and transformed through communicative processes in the Internet era. Secondly, the present study analyzed these categories of citizenship in Chinese people’s everyday talk, but not in the official discourse propagated by the government. In view of the observation about how new media and the Internet have changed the way the Chinese authorities communicate with the people they rule (deLisle, Goldstein, & Yang, 2016), it will be interesting to examine how the Chinese government talks about citizenship and “good citizens” in its official discourse (e.g., in the educational sector), how they (re) articulate its relationship with the Chinese people, and how they account for “good governance” in this changing environment. Lastly, it can be interesting as well to investigate the

role of “communication” in the government’s effort to build a “harmonious” relationship with its people and to maintain its legitimate rule in China, based on Xiong’s (2015) observation that the Chinese government is increasingly aware of the significance of “communication” in managing international crisis and justifying government policies and actions in face of growing discontent and distrust within China. Some possible questions for future investigation are: What notions of communication are referenced in the official discourse? To serve what purposes? What are the underlying cultural assumptions and premises about “communicating” in contemporary China? How are these notions of communication (in the form of meta-discourse) made relevant to notions and practices of “citizenship” and “(good) governance” in an increasingly wired and globalized China? To answer these questions, especially the last two, cultural discourse analysis (Carbaugh, 2005, 2007) could be potentially enlightening by paying attention to webs of meanings surrounding key cultural terms (including membership categories) in Chinese cultural discourse and the meta-commentary about communication in Chinese people’s social and political life.

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APPENDIX 1

A Full Transcription of the Interaction between the Chinese woman and City Inspectors
(and their fellow government agents) on the *Youku* website.

http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNDQ0NzgyMjEy.html

[拍客] 强悍女子雄辩城管武警

- 1 ❏ (0:00:04.2)C1: 你 你这个架子能搭吗 能搭吗?
- 2 ❏ (0:00:05.5)W: 不能搭吗 我这个落地了吗?
- 3 ❏ (0:00:07.4)C1: 你有审批吗
- 4 ❏ (0:00:08.0)W: 需要审批吗? 那 [可以啊
- 5 ❏ (0:00:09.4)C1: [当然要审批了
- 6 ❏ (0:00:10.4)W: 可以啊, 你告诉我需要什么样的审批 你告诉我
- 7 ❏ (0:00:13.5)C1: [你这
- 8 ❏ (0:00:14.3)W: [这是我这是我们家围墙上大的, 我又没有落地那你们, 可以啊 到底
 [哪一条
- 9 ❏ (0:00:18.1)C1: [这空地是你们家的吗
- 10 ❏ (0:00:19.6)W: 这不是我家的吗
- 11 ❏ (0:00:20.9)C1: 啊。围墙是你家的吗?
- 12 ❏ (0:00:22.2)W: 这不是我家的吗
- 13 ❏ (0:00:23.4)C1: 你把产权证拿出来
- 14 ❏ (0:00:24.7)W: 你有什么权利
- 15 ❏ (0:00:26.2)C1: 啊 你把产权证拿出来

- 16 ❏ (0:00:27.5)W: 你有产权证吗?
- 17 ❏ (0:00:27.8)C1: 啊
- 18 ❏ (0:00:29.1)W: 这我们家一百年前的房子
- 19 ❏ (0:00:30.7)C1: 你那产权证出来嘛
- 20 ❏ (0:00:37.2)W: 你有吗? 你去告我啊? 你去告我啊让我拿产权证啊你去告我啊, 这房子是你的
- 21 ❏ (0:00:38.5)C1: 你没产权证怎么说是你的呢
- 22 ❏ (0:00:40.0)W: 产权证你有吗?
- 23 ❏ (0:00:41.0)C1: 阿
- 24 ❏ (0:00:41.3)W: 产权证你有吗? 你有吗?
- 25 ❏ (0:00:42.6)C1: 没有就。。。
- 26 ❏ (0:00:53.6)W: 你有吗? 你去告啊你是执法人员你知道国家公务员你要搞我你举证你哪出的产权证是
你共产党的 对吧? 讲道理
- 27 ❏ (0:00:55.3)C1: 你有产权证你有没有
- 28 ❏ (0:00:57.3)W: 我有没有不要紧去法院告啊拿证据啊 你让法院告我啊
- 29 ❏ (0:01:01.7)C2: 我们现在不跟你讲这个
- 30 ❏ (0:01:29.9)W: 对不对 你不跟我讲 两年前 两年前到我家里也执法带录像啊没有错啊一视同仁啊对不
对? 我在我们家种花台的话需要产权证吗? 转身在你后面, 占用公地的人种花的有
没有产权证啊 [对不对?
- 31 ❏ (0:01:35.6)C3: [别说了
- 32 ❏ (0:01:36.9)C4: 够了够了
- 33 ❏ (0:01:37.4)W: 对不对 中国共产党才90岁对不对我们家房子一百多年这房子需要产权证吗
- 34 ❏ (0:01:40.1) ((城管沉默不语))
- 35 ❏ (0:01:46.2)W: 对不对要讲道理啊, 中国的人权的社会啊对不对 你让我收可以啊一视同仁啊 这么大的
阵容就对付我们一家, 不就是想占用我们家产对吧 是不是 ((看向站在后面的一名
城管))
- 36 ❏ (0:01:47.2) ((城管沉默不语))
- 37 ❏ (0:01:48.4)W: 你不用这么看我, 我知道你是领导对不对 法庭上你必须要拿出证据 拿出 证据你们的
录像两年前你们把握这里砸掉包括我们家修房子里头的东西, 是不是我们家一百
年前的东西们啊窗啊挖走, 手头全抢走对吧你们城管能干, 手续呢 哪来啊 给过手
续没有 现在再来, 行啊, 我种的花台你们再来执法啊, 我这花台没有错啊 我这花
台犯法了吗

- 38 ❏ (0:02:16.0)C4: 行了行了
- 39 ❏ (0:02:22.8)W: 需要什么手续你告诉我。我这花台落地了吗？占用国家的土地了吗？对吧
- 40 ❏ (0:02:24.4)C5: 好了，少说几句吧
- 41 ❏ (0:02:35.2)W: 不是少说几句的问题。要讲道理。中国是个人权社会，对吧，老百姓的财产都不能保护的话，都没有的话，那还体现什么人权啊？是不是
- 42 ❏ (0:02:40.3) ((城管沉默不语))
- 43 ❏ (0:03:56.2)W: 不就是这些水吧。对吧。你们三有楼上，鼓浪屿管委会山上上装木头建房子。我们老百姓建个花台就犯法了 需要这样的阵容来吗 需要这样的阵容来治理吗 鼓浪屿的脏乱差就是因为这个我这个阵容吗 就是因为我这个花台错了吗 看看我这个花台让所有的游客看看，对吧，我的花台犯法了吗，落地了吗，你们城乡法里头可以到我们家去砸花园说是根据城乡法。我现在这里我落地了吗，你说我落地了吗根据城乡法我违反哪一条，哪一条啊，对吧？我违反了哪一条对不对？你们都有录像，你们到法庭上把09年的录像也拿出来。我收，我可以收，一视同仁。鼓浪屿城管对小摊小贩治理不了，对居民百姓就这样治理。我可以拿掉。没错啊，你们有拿录像，法院会调举的。是不是。两年了，不是现在，这种严重侵犯中国人权在哪里。是不是。抢走的东西要归还。09年抢走的我们家多少东西，要不要归还？我们家老宅里的门啊锁啊花 窗啊花门啊全给我们 [搬走
- 44 ❏ (0:03:56.2)C1: [走了
- 45 ❏ (0:04:18.9)W: 还动用了我们武警这么大的阵容，几部车多少人头算一算。对不对。中国的人权在哪里，老百姓的财产谁来保护。啊。四部车子，公安的，城管的对吧，武警的全部都出动。有这样的阵容为什么不到钓鱼岛去。为什么到鼓浪屿老百姓家里呢
- 46 ❏ (0:04:20.9)BS: 好。说得好 说的好
- 47 ❏ (0:04:39.3)W: 是不是。中国的钓鱼岛需要你们呢。对不对，是不是。领导同志啊，这种阵容不是对老百姓的了，应该要去对钓鱼岛。四部车子，这样的阵容，全部武装(对付)老百姓。一个鼓浪屿岛笔钓鱼岛还能干吗，还厉害吗，还严重吗
- 48 ❏ (0:04:44.1)BS: ((围观者鼓掌))
- 49 ❏ (0:04:44.6)W: 谢谢谢谢