# Public Humiliation: Carnival Marketplace and Discourse Power Shifting in Chinese Social Media

**Minghua Wu**

**Abstract** This article aims to explore the Chinese mechanisms for civic participation and how power shifts take place in Chinese social media today. This article proposes a framework of "Carnivalesque participatory discourse" to provide a deeper, more contextually-valid understanding of Internet culture and behaviour in Chinese online communities. This is illustrated through media events of the *Smiling Face of Yang Dacai* and *7.21 Beijing Flood* in which one smile or one sentence lead to public humiliation and fire. This research looks at the carnival marketplace features of the Chinese public sphere that defeat other ways for disciplining officials, and those features of Sina Weibo that allowed for these cases to unfold and discourse power to shift.

**Keywords** Carnivalesque participatory discourse (CPD) · Civic participatory culture · Chinese social media · Discourse power · Networked public sphere · Carnival marketplace

## Introduction

The recent rise of "mass self-communication" has been shown to create new opportunities for challenging the centralised control of information (Castells 2007; 2008), and nowhere more so than in China, where an explosion of "discourse online" is now being observed. Of the 649 million Chinese Internet users in January 2015 (CNNIC 2015), more than half utilize social media, and because the international social media sites Twitter and Facebook have been blocked in China, many Chinese have chosen to communicate as micro-bloggers. *Weibo*, the Chinese micro-blog, which is a unique hybrid of Twitter and Facebook, has increased its number of users in less than two years, by 300% from 630,000 at the end of 2011 to 2.74 million in June, 2012 (CNNIC 2012). The data collected in this study come

M. Wu (✉)
School of Journalism and Communication, Chongqing University, Chongqing, China
e-mail: minghuawu@cqu.edu.cn

from *Sina* which is the dominant platform for Weibo and is the leading online media company in China. Although recently WeChat as a messaging app rival rises, Weibo cannot be replaced or surpassed in terms of its media features and public opinion experience. *Weibo* provides a platform that encourages the silent majority to express their opinions and it facilitates communication between government officials and the public (China.org.cn 2011). The micro-blogging sphere in China has enabled ordinary Internet users to produce alternative perspectives and increasingly drive the authorities to respond to them. Weibo is an unprecedented tool of empowerment for the Chinese public to have their say. Official narratives framed by state media (Zhang 2015) are resisted and negotiated in Chinese social media today. Clearly, to understand the appeal and the power of this micro-blogging trend is a pressing concern for media scholars. This article addresses the following key questions that arise out of this exploding trend: What are Chinese mechanisms for civic participation? How do power shifts take place in Chinese social media today?

In order to understand the interrelationships among the media, culture, and society in general, media researchers draw on social theories as tools. The first and most influential of the theoretical approaches that have been applied to analyse what is happening there is based on Foucault's concept of power, which holds that power is wielded through language in use and that is how it achieves meaning. A second analytical approach to power relations is taken by those who argue for the role of playfulness in discourse, the quality of which Bakhtin called "Carnivalesque" (2006). Bakhtin scholars argue that the concept of Carnival is, in fact, crucial for an understanding of popular cultural practices and the dynamics and patterns of social and cultural change (Hirschkop and Shepherd 2001). A third approach is based on Habermas's "public sphere", which is conceived as a forum for communicating information and points of view which are "rooted in the lifeworld through the associational networks of civil society" (Habermas 1996: 359). This article aims to explore Chinese characteristics of civic participation. These three conceptual frameworks each offer significant insights into the nature of civic social interaction and how it operates. However, this study argues that none of them is adequate alone to characterize and explain the new rise of public participation online, which exhibits the distinctive features of noisy, emotional and highly interactive communication. Rather, it is necessary to conceptualize a new theory or model, drawing on features of each of these three frameworks to capture the phenomenon of escalating online participatory discourse. My goal here is both to identify complementary features of discourse, the public sphere and Carnival, and show the uniqueness of their interaction in online social media in contemporary China. The analysis has led me to propose a new theoretical framework of Carnivalesque Participatory Discourse (CPD) specifically to facilitate the analysis of Chinese social media. Then, I will use case studies of the "*Smiling Official Face Yang Dacai*" and "*7.21 Beijing Flood*" to illustrate how CPD analysis can have practical implications in China today.

## Mapping the Networked Public Sphere in China

Popular communication in Weibo is a Carnival marketplace, but this is not its only mode of operation: it also empowers the new media public sphere in other ways. In order to explain how public spheres are seen to evolve in recent major debates, I will first critique how Habermas defines their structural evolution within broad socio-cultural context and then revisit the concept in relation to the rise of mass self-communication.

According to Jurgen Habermas, a public sphere is a place "where critical, rational discussion" is conducted (1992). Habermas views a public sphere as a communicative structure which has a political function as "a sounding board for problems that must be processed by the political system" (1996). Habermas identifies three conditions for the emergence of a new public sphere. First, there is a shared discourse to which everyone can contribute; second, there is a shared concern; and third, the culture of the state has become a public commodity (Habermas 1991, pp. 36–37).

Inevitably, Habermas's definition of a public sphere has been subject to a wide range of critiques and has extended analytic thinking. Roberts and Crossley (2004) argue that the increasing prominence of public spheres of action has been made possible owing to a decentralization in society, "particularly a separation of political authority from the sphere of everyday and domestic life" (p. 2). There are varieties of public spheres of "discourse, action, representation, and criticism" which follow "a different logic and orient themselves toward different questions, missions, problems, and forms of interaction" (Breese 2011). Fraser (1995) proposes "a postmodern public sphere" which would work towards the "elimination of systemic social inequalities" and argues that multiple forms of contestation are "preferable to a single modern public sphere", which may limit diversity (p. 295). In any case, when people are excluded from public activities because they do not share the common view, they are likely to seek alternative, subversive avenues (p. 67), which may ultimately extend the range of public debate less discriminatingly. Meanwhile, Nicholas Garnham, takes the critiques of Habermas's theory on board and accepts, develops and refines the original thrust of Habermas' ideas. Garnham (1992) asserts the interdependence of institutions, mass public discourse and democratic governance, and it is this interdependence which gives public spheres a material resource base. He (1992) argues that Habermas recognized that the modern world was not one in which a "simple dichotomy of free market versus state control" operated, but one which enables public spheres to mediate between the civil society and the state.

Evidently, then, to be an effective force for change, public spheres of communication depend on media and the relationships they can form between a state and its citizens, particularly since the coming of the electronic age (Boeder 2005). In the new media environment of a networked society, public space functions as a "multitude of online and offline spaces" which go beyond any particular given territory, enabling the construction of "a mosaic of different, but overlapping public

spaces", which blurs the "public-private distinction … by individualization" (Van Dijk 2012).

For any public sphere to be an effective force for change, that is one which enables "divergent interests to be fully represented in the public domain", Curran (1991) suggests that it must combine "a collectivist approach with market processes" so that media can operate as "relatively autonomous from both the government and the market". Castells (2008) describes collectivity in the marketplace as "the space where people come together as citizens and articulate their autonomous views to influence the political institutions of society". How interactivity works in public spheres today is important to consider, since investigating it yields "a more powerful sense of user engagement with media texts, a more independent relation to sources of knowledge, individualised media use, and greater user choice" (Lister 2009).

Convergence is a specific form of interactivity. It is much more than a technological process bringing together multiple media functions in the same devices. Jenkins (2006) interprets convergence as a cultural shift, where grassroots and corporate media strike and intersect in unpredictable ways. Consumers consciously seek out new information and connections, which demand of them, new levels of engagement with media. In a convergence culture, everyone is a participant, though they may have different status or skills in the creation and circulation of information (Jenkins 2006). Thus, the interactive and convergence features of new media enable netizens to be socially active and to participate in civic debate and events. Such participation is "more open-ended" than was previously possible and so less under the control of the media outlets themselves and thus "more under the control of media consumers" (Jenkins 2006). In fact, only with widespread netizen participation can online media and other forms of media be effective sources and organizers of information.

Despite the widespread interest and respect that Habermas's public sphere theory has attracted, its application to political analysis of online communities, however, is considered problematic. This is because it ignores the imbalance of power relations and inequality of capacity in life, which inescapably influence the extent to which individuals can or do participate in public discussion (Shaw 2012). In the past, the silenced majority has not had civic power. However, the phenomenon of mass self-communication, that is, the mass of individuals who now communicate with each other in public forums foregrounds the previously silenced majority in civic discourse.

Shirky (2011) argues that, in the long-term, tools such as social media can "strengthen civil society and the public sphere". The current rise of civic insurgence in nations like China cannot be separated from the emergence of online interactive media that foster "mass self-communication" (Castells 2007). In a networked society, the constant exercising and counteracting of power stimulate thinking and creativity (Castells 2011). Nevertheless, cyberspace rarely offers balanced, egalitarian exchanges of view. Habermas's theorization of public spheres certainly fails to account for them. Shaw (2012) believes that because power and social relations are always unequal, the inevitable imbalances in general communication tend to be

neglected in critiques of online discourse and its potential for the construction of democracy. But it is these imbalances which cause confrontation and noisy discourse online, what Hu (2009) has defined as a "cacophony". As a result, it has been said that "the Chinese Internet is filled with a cacophony of conflicting opinions, irrelevant or emotional outbursts, images stretching from the beautiful to the grotesques and beyond" (Chu and Cheng 2011). All these characteristics have to be accommodated in any models of how it operates with the purpose of transforming the society (Shaw 2012).

Thus, while many theorists have benefited from Habermas's theorization of the public sphere, they have also shown what else needs to be incorporated in order to achieve a sound understanding of the functioning of public online civic discourse. Notably there is a "counter power" that occurs when people have opportunities to challenge and eventually change the power relations established in society. This is usually "self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception" (Castells 2007) and it becomes a form of mass communication among a mass of individuals. Many people communicating with many people forms an effective, novel medium–a platform, a sphere for rebellious individuals to "build their autonomy and confront the institutions of society in their own terms and around their own projects" (Castells 2007). Of profound significance is that, through the mass self-communication that characterises this sphere, it is very difficult for government or institutions to control it (Castells 2012, p. 7). This is the way *Weibo*, as Internet-based public sphere, empower the majority of ordinary Chinese.

Playful interactions among netizens are certainly abundant in Chinese social media and many political struggles have been fought through playful, online activities (Yang 2011, p. 1046). Chinese people have created "a world of carnival, community, and contention" in cyberspace and in so doing "have transformed personhood, society and politics" (Yang 2009). In particular, Chinese netizens regularly engage in parody and criticism and unite behind the regenerating force of laughter on the Internet (Li 2011).

Overall, the networked public sphere in China has three features, namely, playfulness subversiveness, networked participation and micro-level discourse negotiation. Those counter power described as Castells has its own performing form in Chinese socio-cultural context.

## The Social Cultural Context of Public Humiliation in China

In aiming to probe public humiliation taking place in media events that flow out of the postings, specific cultural tradition, stoning the drowning dog, is called into play in the discourses that emerged. The Chinese saying of "Stoning the drowning dog" conveys the punishing of wrongdoers when they are already suffering; "Being stoned with verbal rocks" means that persons are very heavily criticised for what

they said or did. This tradition further defines the characteristics of how discourses exercise power, and engage a whole range of ways of negotiating power.

## *"Stoning the Drowning Dog"*

There exist different figurative uses of "dog" in Chinese, together with their emotional attachments, varied semantic representations, and cultural implications. According to western culture, dogs are most often portrayed as loyal in nature and treated as a family member. However, in Chinese culture, dogs are also connected with betrayal and traits of grovelling, similar to the English use of the word "cur". For instance, if somebody describes another person as "a running dog" (*zǒu gǒu* 走狗) that means the person described is a fawning lackey: a person who follows his master no matter what his master does as long as the master looks after him. The "running dog" label was widely used during the Sino-Japanese war (1937–1945), and the Chinese civil war between the Communist Party and Guomintang (1927–1950) to refer to people who betrayed their friends or the nation for their own personal interest.

"Stoning the drowning dog" is a Chinese proverb *Tong Da Luo Shui Gou* (*tòng dǎ luò shuǐ gǒu* 痛打落水狗) which literally means collectively "stoning the dog in the water in order to beat it". It analogically represents the public getting together to punish a person who has a bad record. The saying originates from Lu (1980), referring to completely crushing one's defeated enemies. *Fa Bu Ze Zhong*(*fǎ bù zé zhòng* 法不责众)is an additional social basis for "Stoning the drowning dog"; it refers to when a group crime (for example civic violence) goes unpunished. That is to say, the law will not punish the masses if many people do the same thing. It is similar to the English expression of "safety in numbers". Furthermore, according to Zhu Huaxin, the Secretary of the *People's Daily* Online Public Opinion Monitoring Centre,

> Many netizens have the spirit of Robin Hood. They play the role of protecting the weak and constraining the strong. As long as you belong to the subordinate group, they support you. They are holding sceptical and resentful attitudes towards government officials, the rich and experts, etc. (Tian 2011).

Group judgement or public humiliation is enforced through using the Human Flesh Search Engine. The Human Flesh Search Engine is a recent phenomenon of cyber-vigilantism in China which involves mediated search processes whereby crowd-powered expand demographic and geographic information about deviant individuals with the shared intention to "expose, shame, and punish them to reinstate legal justice or public morality" (Cheong and Gong 2010). In China's restricted media landscape, the Human Flesh Search Engine is one tool which can successfully enforce "Stoning the drowning dog" in a form of Carnival democracy (Herold 2011a), providing a snapshot of emerging media's empowering potential to enhance collective intelligence for critical civic participation.

Indeed, the search engine acts as a form of street democracy, enabling public juries to spontaneously declare "their binding verdicts on how civic disputes should be resolved", refusing to let "the antagonists leave until the group's judgment is enforced" (Wang and Savitt 2011). In this group judgement, everything is judged based on a simple principle of good or evil, despite the complex fact or situation behind it. In the process, everybody tends to pay attention to their rights and to neglect their social responsibilities or obligations in the Chinese online civil society, since the judgements are subject to the rule of law at the individual level, but not to a group of people.

## *"Being Stoned with Verbal Rocks"*

"Being stoned with verbal rocks" (被拍砖) is the latest catchphrase or Internet slang used by hundreds of millions of Chinese netizens. Literally, when netizens are "being stoned with verbal rocks", they are being harshly criticized or verbally attacked for what they post or what they have done which has been exposed by other active netizens. For example, netizens might say, "Please smack me with a rock" meaning "Tell me what you think about it". However, the narrative context can totally undermine or question or purposely misunderstand the meaning intended by the speaker. The metaphorical concept of "verbal rocks" shares features with the literary mode of Carnival: it can be ambiguous, combining "praise and abuse" and merging "glorified and humiliated" (Bakhtin 1984).

These proverbial expressions represent deeply held values which are easily performed in networked communities and here clearly contribute to showing the empirical process of Carnivalesque public discourse.

## Case Studies and Analytic Framework

In order to gain an authentic sense of the liberation potential of online dialogues, Jenkins has called for the need to "distinguish between different models of participation and to evaluate where and how power shifts may be taking place" (Jenkins 2013). In respect to Chinese social media interactions, this study proposes civic Carnivalesque Participatory Discourse (CPD) as a dynamic framework for throwing light on the complex characteristic features of this context.

## *Carnival Marketplace:* Smiling Official Face Yang Dacai

On 26 August, 2012 in China, one local official, Yang Dacai, Head of the Shanxi Provincial Work Safety Administration, was pictured smiling in front of vehicle
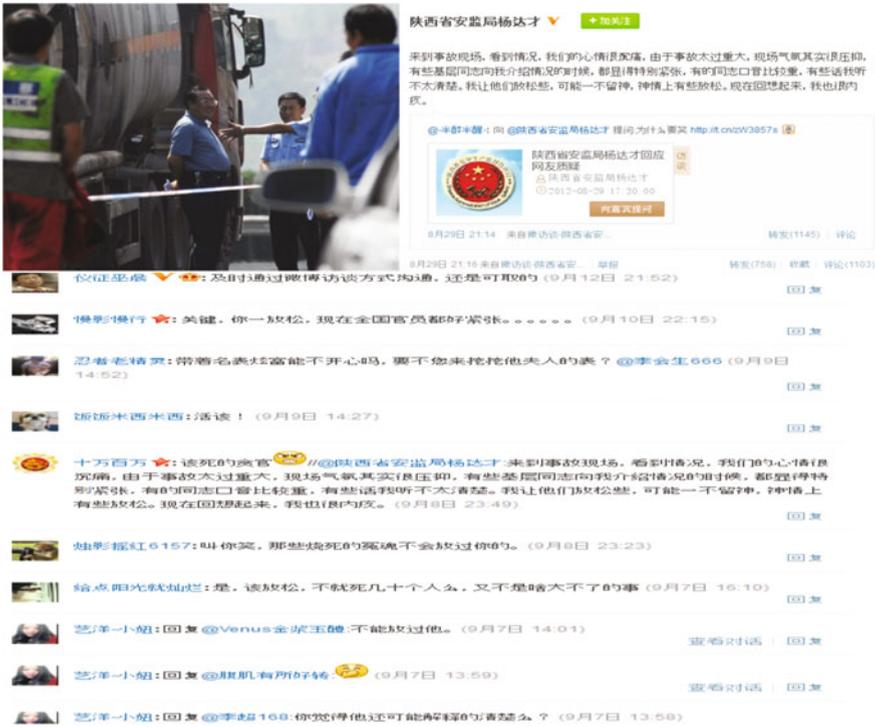
**Fig. 1** "Smiling official Yang Dacai" at the accident scene and his post. *Source* http://www.weibo.com/2975212160/yzrua4h3M (Retrieved 12 September, 2012)

wreckage during his inspection of a fatal truck crash which killed 36 passengers in Yan'an, Shaanxi province (see Fig. 1). The photo was posted on Weibo and suddenly he became famous. Quickly, media exposure of this incident escalated, leading to a public outcry against official corruption.

On 29, August 2012, in order to cope with the crisis he found himself in, Yang Dacai, the smiling official became the first government official who tried to deal with a personal public crisis by opening a Weibo account to explain that he smiled in order to settle the nerves of his colleagues (see Fig. 1). He posted:

> When we came to the scene, we felt deep sorrow. Because the accident was so terrible, our comrades in the lower level of the public service were extremely nervous. Some of them have such a strong accent, that I could not understand them. I was helping them to relax and perhaps was too careless with my facial expression. In fact, I feel deeply guilty.

However, micro-bloggers were not satisfied by his explanation. Through the Human Flesh Search Engine, Yang was also shown wearing a classic collection of five luxury watches in different photos and later was proved to own thirteen ones. Despite his claim that he bought the watches with his legitimate income, Shaanxi

provincial discipline started an investigation into Yang's affairs. Later on, micro-blogger @ Wu Qilun posted:

> Yang Dacai, the watch brother (表哥), has been removed from his official position and accused of disciplinary violations (*Shuanggui)* this morning! Probably, officials will now be cautious of smiling at the wrong time; they will hesitant to wear luxury watches; probably, officials now hate Weibo deeply.

Consequently, this media event became one of most popular topics on *Sina Weibo*. On 21, September 2013, Yang Dacai has become the most well-known "watch brother" and his name has been mentioned around 2,315,923 times when he was claimed to be dismissed[1].

The whole process of the Yang Dacai event, from the initial exposure of the smiling photo to the latest responses on it, worked well through the netizens' fun network. "Biao" is an example of polysemy in Chinese, which refers to watch and also means the relationship between the children or grandchildren of a brother or a sister (in English, they are all called cousin). "Ge" in Chinese is brother. Together the Chinese words "Biaoge" (watch brother) refer to an elder male cousin. Here Chinese netizens call Yang a "watch brother" (表哥), reflecting the discursive mode of playfulness and subversion in this media representation.

So, what can we say are the power dynamics of Chinese social media communications, since here they happen in the informational space which is the carnival marketplace? The concept of Carnival is still evidently problematic and in needed of further definition within the large range of socio-historical contexts in which it is now being employed. In China context, the Carnival effect is achieved through Chinese humour and laughter. In fact, more generally, today's consumer culture in China favours playfulness (Yang 2009). Bakhtin demonstrates that play complements the language of the common people when it is.

Yang's smiling face is the "grotesque body" or the "drowning dog" which leads Chinese netizens together in hatred of corruption. Unfortunately he was stoned heavily by "verbal bricks". All the media practices enacted through networked civic participation exercise discourse power at the micro-level and enhance the convergence online discussion as a new public sphere. However, gradually, the public will feel bored with these "grotesque bodies". As @ hua zong liu le jin gu bang, as a well-known for collecting photos of officials who wear luxury watches in public and said:

> He undercover dozens of officials who wear a lot of luxury watches and Yang Dacai is the only official being dismissed among them. Thus, he considers Yang's case is an exception and cannot be replicated[2]

In general, *Weibo* surveillance is colourful and very entertaining. Obviously, incidental occurrences, such as this process alone, cannot solve corruption or exert

---

[1]http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/201502/P020150203551802054676.pdf

[2]South Reviews (2013), hua zong, wo bu jian biao hen jiu le, 30 July http://www.nfcmag.com/article/4179-2.html

rigorous monitoring in the long term, but the capacity of the Human Flesh Search Engine to respond to corruption is clearly demonstrated in this case. Although, individually, the social force of netizens' responses to each incident and the media exposure these responses attract can escalate rapidly, their attraction may then fade quickly. Nevertheless, it is reasonably to argue that their impact may lie in the longer-lasting power of the social-political process, and that social accountability without election is always active in Chinese civil society (Ma 2012).

## *Resisting Official Narratives:* 7.21 Beijing Flood

Most of the time, the targets being stoned are persons, but this is not always the case. For example, the official narrative itself, or the traditional, positive reporting styles of the state can be the target of verbal attacks. One good example is seen in response to the Beijing floods that occurred on 21 July 2012 in which official language and ideology are consciously opposed.

The spokesperson Liu Hongwei, Chief Engineer of Beijing Flood Control Headquarters, commented on the government's response to the flood on CCTV as three "well done jobs" (*dào wèi* 到位), namely, well forecast, a timely early warning, and good pre-arranged planning. This comment triggered massive numbers of angry responses in the micro-blog sphere (see Fig. 2).

The comments on the post included: "Could you be more shameless than this?" "No shame and no moral boundaries" and "well done jobs (*dào wèi* 到位), disgusting (*dǎo wèi* 倒胃)". The pun of "*dào wèi*" has similar pronunciation with "*dǎo wèi*" (disgusting). Hence, it can be seen that the sarcastic humour permeates into the comments on government response to the flood. Such comments with obvious carnivalesque nature are seen as verbal rocks, used by the mass to stone the person or object caught in the target range.

Another example of this is the online commentary on the "Say Good News" reportage style on the CCTV News (see Fig. 3).

The overall post, especially the last sentence parodies the lyrics of the Beijing popular star Wang Feng's song, "In the Spring":

> If one day, I am old and having nothing to depend on
>
> Please leave me, at that time
>
> If one day, I've quietly departed
>
> Please bury me, in this Spring day
>
> Source: http://www.chinasmack.com/2011/videos/in-coal-pile-chinese-miners-child-version-of-in-spring.html (Viewed 10 May, 2011)

In this case, people who watch "Say Good News" on CCTV news are described as "always living in Spring", which is equivalent to the idea of looking at life through rose-coloured glasses. Interaction on the Chinese social media, about the

**Fig. 2** Beijing flood comments. *Source* http://weibo.com/1855011874/ytJot9h8m (Viewed 23 July, 2012)

CCTV news style and public resistance to it, has undermined the Party style of news reportage and triggered an alternative style of news delivery.

Thus it is apparent that, in the last two decades, China's digital information regime change has brought potentially significant opportunities for citizens to challenge the state statement in online communities. Discourse is not just linguistic signs but is the practices and ideas that constitute lived reality (Foucault 1972/2010: 49). Foucault's conception of discourse as central in the construction and understanding of reality cannot be separated from the role of "power" in the production of "knowledge", which he understood to mean "the social, historical and political conditions under which, for example, statements come to count as true or false" (McHoul and Grace 1997). One can only talk about truth from a specific social context according to "the rules of some discursive "police" (Foucault 1972/2010: 224). Evidently, Foucault's discourse framework is "regulated by institutional processes" which seek to order and, if necessary, exclude. In such processes, knowledge is sorted into that "which is perceived to be true and that which is considered to be false" (Mills 1997: 57–59). In this way, discourse can be

政经观察员范利祥 ✔ 🔴    ✓ 已关注 | 取消

我有一个梦想,永远生活在新闻联播里:那里的孩子都能上起学,穷人都能看起病,百姓住
每月77元的廉租房,工资增长11%,大学生就业率达到99%,物价不涨,交通不堵,大水淹
不死人,没有地沟油,没有杀人奶粉,环境宜人,罪犯统统落马,言论自由。如果有一天,我
老无所依,请把我埋在,新闻联播里。

8月13日 22:24 来自新浪微博 | 举报                         转发(99) | 收藏 | 评论(27)

Translation:
  I wish I could live in the world depicted by *xin wen lian bo* (CCTV News)
  where, all children can afford education;
  Poor people can see a doctor without worrying about the cost.
  Ordinary people can live in cheap housing with just 77 RMB rent per month.
  The salary increase rate is 11%
  And the employment rate of new graduates reaches 99%.
  The prices of all kinds of goods stay stable and traffic is always good.
  Floods will not kill people.
  There is no "gutter" cooking oil, no poisoned milk powder and no pollution.
  The environment has been improved.
  Criminals are always caught.
  People enjoy freedom of speech.
  If one day, I am old and have no resources to depend on,
  Please bury me in the news of CCTV.

**Fig. 3** Online commentaries on the CCTV "Say Good News". *Source* http://weibo.com/1674758845/yx15Ms1Dc (Viewed 31 August, 2012)

characterized as central to social systems. Within this in mind, it is not hard to understand how through participating in social networking sites, which depend on discourse, ordinary Chinese people can and do exercise power.

## Discourse Power Shifting Within Carnivalesque Participatory Discourse

This article examines how social media discourses in China may lead to the establishment of various held truths and beliefs. Using a Foucauldian discourse framework to analyse the online practices of Chinese micro-bloggers, for example, can foreground the interplay of language, ideas and practices in China, where power is exercised simultaneously in both overt and covert ways. Foucault's notion of the discourse offers a fundamentally helpful explanatory bridge between language in use and social systems. For example, analysing the relationship between discourse and power allows us to understand how power operates in society; it especially helps us to capture how netizens negotiate and claim power discursively.

   Foucault's interpretation of discourse and social systems depends on his understanding of power as a mode of exclusion or inclusion. His emphasis on the dynamics of power is crucial in any analysis of how ordinary Chinese people can

wield influence on the state. Further, he claims that discourse is the medium through which power can be achieved by the majority of ordinary people.

Understanding the role of power in the production of knowledge is a crucial element of Foucault's discourse theory, in that it proposes a non-economic analysis of power. Foucault suggests that "Power is neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised, and that it only exists in action" (Foucault 1980: 89). It is "at this vulgar, pragmatic, quotidian and minor level" where language is constantly being used and reinvented that we can learn more about the assumptions on which governments and societies operate (Rose 1999). This microanalysis of power look at how particular participatory practices are characterized by "specific power balances and struggles at different levels, moments, and locations" (Jenkins and Carpentier 2013: 267).

Power as exercise rather than process and it can work from the bottom up because it is enmeshed in numerous social and government practices. Foucault uses the notion of capillary to describe how power operates at the micro-level. Indeed, Foucauldian discourse studies conceives individuals as central to how everyday life functions. For an understanding of the everyday modes of power, a new technology is required, one which examines "their concrete and precise character, their grasp of a multiple and differentiated reality" (Foucault 1984: 66). For all these reasons, it is clear how useful a Foucauldian perspective is in analysing how a centralised, controlling state engages in discourse practices which themselves have the potential to challenge social structures.

Discourses do not exist in isolation. They are in constant conflict with other discourses and other social practices over questions of truth and authority (Mills 1997). To understand how meaning is negotiated in discourse, researchers have had to shift their attention from the individual to the systems of social practice in which the individuals participate, because discourse does more than represent reality, it signifies it, "constituting and constructing the world in meaning" (Fairclough 1992). However, from Fairclough's perspective, Foucault doesn't go far enough because he fails to engage with the crucial, linguistic aspects of discourse, that is, how meaning is realized in specific texts. Lemke (1995) emphasizes, as both Foucault and Fairclough do, the active role of discourse in society, suggesting that discourse does not just reconfirm "existing social relationships and patterns of behaviour"… [But also] "renegotiates social relationships and introduces new meanings and new behaviours.

In effect, individuals construct and interpret people's identities, viewpoints and values (Thibault 1998), and they do so in ways that demonstrate that language can be used differently, even in contradictory ways, because, "Every use of discourse is at once a judgement about its relation to dominant forms of power and either an assent or a resistance to this relation" (Frow 1985). In fact, "meaning arises through the "difference" between the participants in any dialogue (Hall 1997). Nowadays, social networking opportunities (such as those online) encourage dialogue in the public domain, and meaning is actively and socially "constructed in society through the process of communicative action" (Castells 2009). Such discourse opportunities

are powerful. Suddenly, individual citizens can have an immediate role in civic discourse.

In online communication, civic power is employed and exercised through "a net-like organisation" with individuals as its agents (Foucault 1980, p. [98]). However, in this process of negotiating meaning and power in Chinese social media, citizens' contributions to national debate and discourses of power may not be direct or overt; they tend to depend on ironic, playful language use. In China today, the micro-blogging sphere is more a place for catharsis where people vent their frustrations, complaints and anger. This phenomenon is not neglected in this study and Bakhtin's notion of Carnival and Carnivalesque provide invaluable entry into this domain.

However, Foucault's framework is not fully explanatory, for this context because it does not accommodate the playfully entertaining elements of online discourse among Chinese netizens. Specifically, it does not capture its distinctive features of noisy, emotional self-expression and interaction. Carnival theory is especially illuminating in this context. It acknowledges diversity and multiple voices as potentially democratic and powerful (Gardiner 2004; Hirschkop 2004; Roberts and Crossley 2004). In contrast with Habermas' desire for an ideal, rational world speaking with one, shared voice, Carnival accepts the reality of public pluralism and the power of contestation (Gardiner 2004). Moreover, Carnivalesque discourse as it exists today in China does empower ordinary people with public voices. Carnival enables people to have fun as well as mock themselves and the state. But Carnival in itself does not bring power. It is how Carnivalesque discourse is used and interpreted, in particular, in online social media, that can inform about the nature of power and forces for change in China.

According to Bakhtin (1984), in the contexts he was critiquing feasts had roles other than their official, religious function; they also performed a folk Carnival role, employing "laughter" as well as providing "material sustenance". Bakhtin employed Carnivalesque in two ways: to represent the transgressive, resistant impact of laughter and to symbolize what he called "grotesque realism" (1984). He saw Carnivalesque as a liberating, energizing force which engages both these elements. This section examines these two uses of Carnivalesque, they might be applied to online communication in social media in China. Despite continuing controversy over Bakhtin's notion of Carnival, the Carnivalesque and the liberating potential he ascribed to them, the concept of Carnival has proved invaluable in building an analytic framework resource for interpreting citizens' interactions online in the public domains of social media.

Laughter offers one view of the world. Sometimes, it reveals a new stance on truth or knowledge. Carnival laughter, for example, offers ordinary people a form of transgression and resistance that resonates with truth for them. The Renaissance conception of laughter was deeply philosophical; laughter then was viewed as "one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole", and even, as the only way that "certain essential aspects of the world [were] accessible" (Bakhtin 1984). Its meaning was determined by the medieval culture of folk humour. For example, medieval communities may have become involved church rituals by

translating them into "gluttony and drunken orgies on the altar table, indecent gestures, disrobing", so that the feast actually became "a parody and travesty of the official cult, with masquerades and improper dances" (Bakhtin 1984). For example, at least once a year, the Feast of Fools became an occasion of laughter, expressly for releasing emotion and personal freedom (Bakhtin 1984).

However, it is necessary to rethink the liberation potential of Carnival laughter. There is a substantial body of discussion on its so-called liberating energies. Some have argued that laughter is serious and that it is a historical force (Morson and Emerson 1990). Others have suggested that the regenerative power of Carnival laughter is hypothetical. In particular, Bernstein (1986) argues that the laughter does not challenge social conventions since ruling institutions "permit themselves to be mocked, due to full confidence in their own power to emerge still more firmly entrenched the following morning". Patently, festival laughter occurs on specific occasions and only within recognized limits. The general consensus among scholars is that Carnival serves merely as a "safety-valve for social tensions" (Dentith 1995), which clearly differs from Bakhtin's view of Carnival as "an anti-authoritarian force that can be mobilized" (Dentith 1995).

Therefore, the application of the Bakhtinian notion of Carnival and Carnivalesque provides a good standing-point for Internet research in general and is especially pertinent to the study of "online China and its relationship to offline society and politics" (Herold 2011b). In this way, the relationship between online and offline lives for Chinese netizens resonates with Bakhtin's concept of Carnival. A person of the Middle Ages lived, as it were, two lives:

> One was the official life, monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism, reverence, and piety; the other was the life of the carnival square, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities, familiar contact with everyone and everything (Bakhtin 1973).

The Internet in China enables "a digital version of medieval marketplaces", where diverse forms of interactivity are generated (Meng 2011). Carnival as an analytic tool may therefore be vital to understanding the dynamics and patterns of social and cultural changes in China's online sphere (Chu and Cheng 2011; Humphrey 2000; Yang 2009).

Since online participation in China clearly has Carnivalesque features, in this study, I draw on Bakhtin's Carnival to capture those features. Carnival is defined as a specific event which is temporary, so, its potential for social transformation in a specific culture may be have to be pinned down. But as it is built up Carnival gradually establishes a mode of public participation and collaboration. Understanding how Carnival operates in China, therefore, may be a key to determining how ordinary Chinese people can exercise group power. The cumulative effects of Carnival may increase public awareness and develop individual citizens' sense of social entitlement. Consequently, a new form of civic participation and public opinion may be formed which can impact public policy and

decision-making. In China, as in the Middle Ages in the West, Carnival can work to redistribute power negotiations through humour.

## Conclusion

This study presents this new framework, based on the notions of Carnival and discourse, as a methodological approach for capturing and interpreting features of public interaction online in China. This framework is consistent with the cultural traditions, the media landscape, and the current context for social transformation in contemporary China. Here I argue that this framework explicates the playful nature of discourse among ordinary Chinese people who micro-blog and in so doing captures the ways in which they redistribute the balance of civic power and attain a measure of influence in public activity.

In sum, Carnivalesque Participatory Discourse as proposed in this article describes a new form of analytical framework for understanding the potentials of civic participation in Chinese social media, the largest Internet base in the world. For the first time, ordinary Chinese people have an alternative media platform on which to present the everyday realities of their lives and increasingly drive the authorities to respond to them. Whether it can prepare active citizenship for rational discussion and democracy development, further observation is still needed.

## References

Bakhtin, M. (1973). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*. London: University of Minnesota Press.
Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Rabelais and his world*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
Bakhtin, M. (2006). Carnival and the carnivalesque. In J. Storey (Ed.), *Cultural theory and popular culture: A reader* (2nd ed.). London: Prentice Hall.
Bernstein, M. A. (1986). When the carnival turns bitter: Preliminary reflections upon the abject hero. In G. S. Morson (Ed.), *Bakhtin: Essays and dialogues on his work*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Boeder, P. (2005). Habermas' heritage: The future of the public sphere in the network society. *First Monday, 10,* 1–15.
Breese, E. B. (2011). Mapping the variety of public spheres. *Communication Theory, 21,* 130–149.
Castells, M. (2007). Communication, power and counter-power in the network society. *International Journal of Communication, 1*(1), 238–266.
Castells, M. (2008). The new public sphere: global civil society, communication networks, and global governance. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 616*(1), 78–93.
Castells, M. (2009). *Communication power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Castells, M. (2011). A network theory of power. *International Journal of Communication, 5,* 773–787.

Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of outrage and hope: social movements in the internet age*. Cambridge: Polity.

Cheong, P. H., & Gong, J. (2010). Cyber vigilantism, transmedia collective intelligence, and civic participation. *Chinese Journal of Communication, 3,* 471–487.

China.org.cn. *2011: Year of government micro-blogs* [Online]. China.org.cn. Available: http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2011-12/16/content_24171535.htm. Accessed July 18, 2012.

Chu, W. -C. & Cheng, C. -T. (2011). Cultural convulsions: Examining the Chineseness of cyber China. In D. K. Herold & P. Marolt (Eds.), *Online society in China: Creating, celebrating, and instrumentalising the online carnival.*

CNNIC. (2012). *Statistical reports on the Internet development in China: The 30th survey report* [Online]. Available: http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/201207/t20120723_32497.htm. Accessed August 21, 2012.

CNNIC. (2015). *Statistical reports on the Internet development in China: The 35th survey report* [Online]. Available: http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/201502/P020150203551802054676.pdf Accessed August 21, 2015.

Curran, J. (1991). Rethinking the media as a public sphere. In P. Dahlgren & C. Sparks (Eds.), *Communication and citizenship: Journalism and the public sphere*. New York: Routledge.

Dentith, S. (1995). *Bakhtinian thought: An introductory reader*. London and New York: Routledge.

Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Foucault, M. (1972/2010). *The archaeology of knowledge.* New York: Vintage.

Foucault, M. (1980). Two lectures. In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977* (pp. 78–108). New York: Pantheon.

Foucault, M. (1984). What is an author. In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *The Foucault reader*. New York: Pantheon.

Fraser, N. (1995). Politics, culture, and the public sphere: toward a postmodern conception. In L. Nicholson & S. Seidman (Eds.), *Social postmodernism: beyond identity politics* (pp. 287–312). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Frow, J. (1985). Discourse and power. *Economy and Society, 14,* 193–214.

Gardiner, M. (2004). Wild publics and grotesque symposiums: Habermas and Bakhtin on dialogue, everyday life and the public sphere. In: N. Crossley & J. M. Robers (Eds.), *After Habermas: New perspectives on the public sphere*. Oxford and Malden: Blackwell and The Sociological Review.

Garnham, N. (1992). The media and the public sphere. In C. Callhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the public sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Habermas, J. (1991). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Habermas, J. (1992). Further reflections on the public sphere. In: C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the public sphere*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The MIT Press.

Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hall, S. (1997). The spectacle of the 'other'. In: S. Hall (Ed.), *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices.* London: Sage.

Herold, D. K. (2011a). Human flesh search engines: Carnivalesque riots as components of a 'Chinese democracy'. In D. K. Herold & P. Marolt (Eds.), *Online society in china: Creating, celebrating, and instrumentalising the online carnival*. New York: Routledge.

Herold, D. K. (2011b). Introduction: Noise, spectacle, politics: Carnival in Chinese cyberspace. In D. K. Herold & P. Marolt (Eds.), *Online society in China: Creating, celebrating, and instrumentalising the online carnival*. New York: Routledge.

Hirschkop, K. (2004). Justice and drama: On Bakhtin as a complement to Habermas. In: N. Crossley & J. M. Roberts (Eds.), *After Habermas: New perspective on the public sphere.* Oxford and Malden: Blackwell/The Sociological Review.

Hirschkop, K., & Shepherd, D. (2001). *Bakhtin and cultural theory.* Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.

Hu, Y. (2009). *The rising cacophony: Personal expression and public discussion in the Internet age.* China, Guanxi shifan Daxue Chubanshe: Guilin.

Humphrey, C. (2000). Bakhtin and the study of popular culture: Re-thinking carnival as a historical and analytical concept. In C. Brandist & G. Tikhanov (Eds.), *Materializing Bakhtin: The Bakhtin circle and social theory.* Oxford: Macmillan.

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide.* New York: New York University Press.

Jenkins, H. (2013). Rethinking 'rethinking convergence/culture'. *Cultural Studies*, 1–31.

Jenkins, H., & Carpentier, N. (2013). Theorizing participatory intensities: A conversation about participation and politics. *Convergence, 19,* 265–286.

Lemke, J. L. (1995). *Textual politics: Discourse and social dynamics.* London: Taylor & Francis Group.

Li, H. (2011). Parody and resistance on the Chinese Internet. In: D. K. Herold & P. Marolt (Eds.), *Online society in China: Creating, celebrating, and instrumentalising the online carnival.* Routledge.

Lister, M. (2009). *New media: A critical introduction.* New York: Routlege.

Lu, X. (1980). Lun Feier Polai Yinggai Huanxing. *Complete works of Lu Xun (Lu Xun quanji).*

Ma, J. (2012). The rise of social accountability in China. *Australian Journal of Public Administration, 71,* 111–121.

Mchoul, A. W., & Grace, W. (1997). *A Foucault primer: Discourse, power, and the subject.* London and New York: Routledge.

Meng, B. (2011). From steamed bun to grass mud horse: E gao as alternative political discourse on the Chinese internet. *Global Media and Communication, 7,* 33.

Mills, S. (1997). *Discourse.* London and New York: Routledge.

Morson, G. S., & Emerson, C. (1990). *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a prosaics.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Roberts, J. M. & Crossley, N. (2004). Introduction. In: N. Crossley & J. M. Roberts (Eds.), *After Habermas: New perspectives on the public sphere.* Blackwell Publishing/The Sociological Review.

Rose, N. (1999). *Powers of freedom: Reframing political thought.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shaw, F. (2012). *The politics of blogs: Theories of discursive activism online* (p. 41). Incorporating Culture & Policy: Media International Australia.

Shirky, C. (2011). The political power of social media: Technology, the public sphere, and political change. *The Foreign Affairs, 90,* 28–41.

Thibault, P. J. (1998). Textual politics: Discourse and social dynamics (Book Review). *Mind, Culture, and Activity, 5,* 240–244.

Tian, G. (2011). *The controversy confrontation between rich and poor caused by "Audi and Tricycle"* [Online]. Zhongqing Shixian. Available: http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2011-12/14/nw.D110000zgqnb_20111214_6-01.htm. Accessed December 12, 2013.

Van Dijk, J. (2012). *The network society.* London: Sage Publications Limited.

Wang, A. & Savitt, S. 2011. *In China, strolling for reform [Online].* The New York Times: The New York Times. Available: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/05/opinion/05iht-edsavitt05.html. (accessed 20 August 2012).

Yang, G. (2009). *The power of the Internet in China: Citizen activism online.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Yang, G.(2011). Technology and its contents: issues in the study of the Chinese Internet. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *1*(1), 1-8.

Zhang, W. M. (2015). Discourse of resistance: Articulations of national cultural identity in media discourse on the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in China. *Discourse & Communication, 9*(3), 355–370.

## Author Biography

**Minghua Wu** is a lecturer in the School of Journalism and Communication, Chongqing University. In 2014, she received her Doctoral degree from the University of Adelaide Australia. Her Ph.D. thesis is about Chinese social media practices: empowerment through subversive pleasures. Her research focuses on media criticism, feminism media studies, new media representation, online culture and discourse power.