

## An Internet with Chinese Characteristics

With the advent of new information and communication technologies, there is a renewed investment in achieving the idealized public sphere in the new digital media world. Amid such spirited explorations, it becomes ever more important that we equip ourselves with a more culturally informed framework and reach a thoughtful assessment of the democratic potentials with the Internet.

Although theorized way before the Internet age, Habermas' ideal model has also heavily influenced the examination of new digital media and its democratic potential. Not only have scholars primarily focused their discussion on explicitly politically oriented venues, but they also follow the standards set by Habermas in evaluating the civic use of the new media. In this chapter, I review the theoretical debates surrounding the new digital media and public sphere. Although the book's focus is about entertainment and politics, any discussion about China's media in the 2000s should not leave out a look into its new digital media, especially the social media. This effort is also relevant as the sample of citizen discourses in this book will come from their online discussions.

This chapter first offers an overview of the cyberspace carved out by the Chinese state for its citizen-audience, which is at the same time connected to a globalizing world and disconnected from it. As one becomes more aware of the mechanism in which Internet censorship works in China, theoretical revisions by the notions of cultural citizenship and an aesthetic public sphere will prove useful to one's understanding not only about the civic significance of entertainment, but also that of the

Internet. I expand on this idea in the second section. The third and final part of this chapter details the empirical framework of the book so that readers can transition to the following three analytic chapters with a clear idea about the samples and methods of my analysis.

### (Dis)CONNECTION TO A GLOBALIZING WORLD

In comparing between the fate of the Arab world and China, besides the power of narratives, many would note the integral role played by the new media in the Arab Spring movements. Although the penetration rate for Facebook in Egypt was quite low at the start of the revolutions, at only 4.5%, social media platforms were critical in fanning the initial energy for citizens to take actions and spread useful information about the movements and became more popular along the way in the Arab world. In contrast, censorship is so blatant in China that many Western-originated social media platforms (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Youtube) and media sources (i.e. *The New York Times*) have been outright blocked. As of 2013, 88% of the Internet users in Egypt were also using these social media outlets, compared to only 48% of the Chinese Internet users (Rainie and Poushter 2014). Having erected one of the greatest firewalls in the world, the central government of China actively monitors such a powerful medium as the Internet and diligently regulates what ordinary citizens can express to the unprecedentedly wide audience online. Common practices include blocking Web sites that can potentially pose a threat to the stability of the general society or the authority of the central government; censoring politically or culturally sensitive vocabularies so that when people publish contents with words that appear on the list of banned vocabularies, i.e. “democracy,” such entries would be automatically replaced by symbols such as “\*” or “X”, oftentimes directly deleting online posts or articles that are too provocative or anti-establishment.

In the summer of 2009, the government announced that all personal computers to be sold in Mainland China had to install a new software, *Green Dam*, which was developed by the government to help block pornographic or vulgar content. However, a close look at the blocking list found that it also contained certain politically sensitive vocabularies that had been censored online. The imposition on domestic as well as foreign computer manufacturers resembled numerous other instances in which the government simply conceals its politically charged censorship under the general good of the society. Subsequently, the policy was indefinitely

postponed due to strong protest by foreign companies, local organizations, and not to be neglected, average citizens of China. In the same year, the state also started to require online users to accompany their comments on news Web sites with their real names (Ansfield 2009), which put a heavier damper on Internet speech that is already limited in the country. Such efforts show the great lengths to which the Chinese government is willing to go in order to harness the impact of the Internet. While the state holds its tight leash on the political use of its media and public grievances bottle up in the citizens' post-reform struggles, serious political conversations permeate into the seemingly apolitical spheres, which is the focus of this book.

As China closed its Internet borders to social media sites from outside the country, a Chinese Internet giant, Sina, released its own version of microblogging service in 2009. Although the service had already existed in China before Sina's endeavor, the timing of its debut amid other popular foreign platforms' ban in China and Sina's unabashed copying of Facebook and Twitter designs in creating its own crossbreed, immediately propelled Sina Weibo to great popularity. In each post, users are limited to 140 Chinese characters<sup>1</sup>, equivalent to the number of English letters allowed in each Twitter post. However, the Chinese language gives space to much more elaborate expressions within the same limit, as one Chinese character on its own can carry distinct meanings. Thanks to the lack of competition from major foreign sites, microblogging's combination of horizontal and vertical communications allured a large portion of China's Internet users. In June 2013, there were 330,770,000 microblogging users in China, taking up 56% of its overall Internet users (CNNIC 2013). At the height of its spread, microblogging's growth rate in the first half of 2011 reached 208.9% (CNNIC 2011). In 2014, Sina Weibo, along with a few other Chinese tech companies, started to trade on the New York Stock Exchange.

Among all the microblogging service providers in China, Sina occupies a leading position. While microblogging literally translates as *weibo* in Chinese, due to its monopoly in the market, one frequently references Sina Weibo as "the Weibo" in China, and the site enjoys a unique URL ([www.weibo.com](http://www.weibo.com)) that further solidifies the connection. Although Weibo promised to empower the Chinese Internet users to connect with others and challenge the government authority in unprecedented ways, the state censors have been watching their exchanges closely and promptly deleting posts that touch political nerves. In addition, the

central authorities effectively co-opted Weibo as another tool of collecting information about power abuses limited to local levels and creating the illusion of an open and responsible government by selectively cracking down on individuals, rather than institutions (Sullivan 2014). State writers further infiltrate this channel to promote state ideologies and collect information for the mainstream media to steer public opinion. As a result, Chinese Weibo users are becoming disillusioned about the democratic potential of Weibo and moving on from this platform to better and newer applications. In simply a year from June 2013, the penetration rate of microblogging service among Internet users in China fell to 43.6% (CNNIC 2014). It was also in 2014 when Sina fortified its monopoly among Chinese microblogging services as others started to turn elsewhere in the market due to the dwindling user base and Sina's continued competitive edge. As a snippet into the Chinese Internet users' online activities in the 2000s, this book will sample discussions from traditional Internet forums as well as Sina Weibo. In the concluding chapter, I will discuss the implications of recent developments in China's social media landscape, especially the rise of more mobile-based applications and the case of WeChat in particular.

To be sure, although the Chinese Internet suffers many flaws, citizens in the Arab world are not enjoying one free from power struggle. The Arab governments frequently censor Internet content and jail activists and ordinary citizens alike. After social media played a critical role in fanning national angst about social injustice in Egypt and igniting the Arab Spring, the Egyptian government shut down the whole country's Internet access, which was already too late and helped to prove the point of the antigovernment movement. Compared to China, however, Egypt still ranks higher in its overall media freedom and the status of its Internet freedom. Freedom House is a trusted independent watchdog of media freedom around the world and started to track Internet freedom in 2009, then again from 2011 to present day. In the seven years (2009, 2011–2016) that the project "Freedom on the Net" has statistics for, Egypt received a "partly free" every year until turning "not free" in 2015, while China consistently remained "not free." When citizen outcry for freedom in China was reaching its height during the Arab Spring movements, foreign sites that are less politically charged, such as LinkedIn, a social media outlet mainly for professional networking, were shut out and several popular virtual private network (VPN) services were disabled (Lafraniere and Barboza 2011). Speaking about China's

“filtering system known officially as Golden Shield and unofficially as the Great Firewall,” James Fallows (2011), national correspondent for *The Atlantic*, points out that “the genius of China’s Internet censorship has been its flexible repression.” Although many people know how to skirt the state censorship machine through installing VPN on their computers, which then masks their IP addresses as somewhere outside the country and enables them to access forbidden Web links, the government makes the information hard enough to find so that most people do not bother to try.

While there is evidence that the Chinese government continues to clamp down on its citizens’ access to such VPN services (Pham 2017), Yang (2009) notes that the externally enforced censorship regulates both the content and the form of expression. Online forums increasingly resemble the legacy media in their editorial approach and rhetorical styles as a result of state censorship (Li 2010). Although there is an impression that China’s Internet in general allows more free speech, state regulators arbitrarily shut down Web sites and remove online content at the hint of any political disturbance (Lagerkvist 2006). Li (2010) states that China’s Internet users tend to dodge state surveillance by gravitating toward more private and/or less politically oriented venues, which potentially fragments the online opinion space. It is the goal of this book to advise against a hasty dismissal of such leisure-driven discourses, as they may bear great civic significance nonetheless.

China’s intense Internet censorship has further led to self-censorship within its Internet industry and among its users. In order to operate successfully in China, media organizations are motivated to carefully navigate the fine rules of appropriateness defined by the government in their productions and content control. Mou et al. (2011) discuss the rampant use of the 50-cent party and human flesh search engines. “50-cent” refers to the meager amount that the Chinese state pays its hired writers for each online post of praise or defense they compose for the Communist leadership. While Chinese netizens express their cynicism and even disgust through such a derogatory term as “the 50-cent party,” they tend to also withdraw from earnest online discussions due to their distrust toward the authenticity of other participants’ contributions.

The use of human flesh search engine further adds to such distrust. Resembling recent developments in the West of online vigilantes, China’s Internet users start to collaborate in their efforts of investigating the real-life identity of targeted individuals. Unlike the conventional

search engine, which relies on automatic machine algorithm, the social engineering of “human flesh search” is primarily based on human knowledge and intelligence. In the 2000s, there were many highly publicized cases in which some Chinese netizens pooled together bits of information from their personal knowledge networks in finding clues to images circulated online of others who abused their civil rights, and often exposed the real-life identities of such people. While the practice of “human flesh search” often appears empowering and suggests that Chinese citizens increasingly take matters into their own hands when justice is not served properly, they also fear the government’s use of this exact mechanism, thanks to its sophisticated technology and tight registration rules. The state is more technologically equipped to trace anonymous IDs to IP addresses, frequently arrests activists that spread anti-establishment opinions online, and in some cases “disappears”<sup>2</sup> such public figures in an improper form of detainment. In 2013 the government further made it a crime for Internet users to express anti-state sentiments or endorse pro-democracy changes. Combined with the Chinese government’s ability to implement the human flesh search and as a result actually punish online activists, China’s Internet users fear state retaliation and are more inclined to practice self-imposed censorship.

As a result, scholars are often cautiously optimistic in their evaluations about the civic significance of Internet in China. Weber and Jia (2007) conclude that despite the Internet’s promise for non-political issues or limited forms of civic engagement, it has not presented itself as a revolutionary tool for Chinese citizens to fundamentally challenge the state authority. Guided by such major standards from political deliberation theories as justification, complexity, and civility, Zhou et al. (2008) carried out a content analysis of *Guangzhou Daily*’s discussion forum. Given that the newspaper represents serious legacy media in China, the scholars found it disheartening that discourses circulated through its online forum do not match traditional standards of serious, quality political discussions.

With such restrictive nature of China’s Internet in mind, scholars argue for a realistic evaluation that does not downgrade its contributions and the creative responses that Chinese Internet users adopt to harsh Internet control (Yang 2009). For example, it has become a common practice for online discussants to cleverly use different Chinese characters that share the same pronunciation as the sensitive words being censored by the government. The words may look different and carry unrelated

literal meanings, but contextually the connotations remain unchanged. Instead of uncritically using such ideal concepts as “public sphere” that arose from Western democracies, Jiang (2010) argues that “authoritarian deliberation” can better reveal the idiosyncratic nature of China’s online public sphere. Citing Habermas’ own recent revision on the public sphere theory by distinguishing between strong public and weak public, Jiang suggests that casual chat online, although only forming weak publics, can still put a check on the state, especially local authorities. Zheng (2007) echoes this mentality in suggesting that the Internet might create in China more “political liberalization” than “political democratization” in that although not realizing full-blown democracy, the technology at least allows citizens to better hold the state accountable.

It is in this context that I discuss the unique position of entertainment media in the contemporary political life of ordinary Chinese citizens. Compared to the serious and formal media content, entertainment is more firmly embedded in the average citizens’ everyday life and less heavily policed. Civic association formed around common entertainment experiences can be more achievable than other formidable ways of political participation. While the Chinese state’s authoritarian media control drives cultural elites and ordinary audience alike to form alternative public spheres outside the highly contained political sphere, I argue that it is important that we take a close look at the discourses they construct around their entertainment experiences. Such examinations have great implications for Western societies as well. In the next section, I offer a brief discussion of Western scholarship that has reflected on the creation of public sphere via emerging media and my contributions to this literature.

## CONVERGENCE OF ENTERTAINMENT AND PUBLIC SPHERE IN NEW MEDIA CONTEXTS

When the civic use of the Internet started, potential space for public discourses among ordinary citizens expanded greatly. The new digital technology makes available many unprecedented opportunities for the creation of alternative public spheres outside the formal political sphere. Compared to traditional mainstream media, such as TV, newspapers, and radio—which is the major channel of communication in the formal public sphere and usually exclusive to professional journalists, experts, and state elites—the Internet presents a multitude of merits for ordinary

citizens. For one thing, it is more accessible. The Internet is much more open to the general public. On an Internet discussion board, one does not have to be an authoritative figure on a certain topic to voice one's opinion. In contrast, it is much harder for an average citizen to enter the mainstream media and express one's opinion freely.

Second, and closely related to the first point, there is much less censorship or "gate-keeping" in the online sphere. Not only can one more easily gain access to an online public sphere, an ordinary user does not have to use a certain language style to be heard publicly. There is less restriction in what to say, and how to say it. Third, many people embrace the Internet for the diversity it represents. Nowadays, one can effortlessly find an Internet-based group or Web site devoted to any particular topic. It is much easier to connect with others based on common interests or identities. Although these connections are possible as well in one's offline world, the Internet's reach is incomparable. In the digital world of hyperlinks and with the contribution of numerous participants, one can more easily find much in-depth information and discussion online.

Of course, such merits are not guaranteed in the online sphere, and their impact is not always immediate or positive. Indeed, many Internet scholars have pointed out the flip side of the expected virtues of the Internet. For example, while many optimists celebrated the chance of being anonymous in online discussion, so that a person's argument can be merely judged by its own merits without unfair reference to the author's identity and authority on the claims, as Habermas would insist, skeptics worry that anonymity would lead to irresponsible social behaviors in the online sphere, such as unsubstantiated arguments, or worse, flaming—the use of uncivil language (Lee 1996). The opportunities for more people to participate and share thoughts and interests with others are discounted by concerns of Internet fragmentation, namely the possibility that people only bond with others bearing exactly the same ideologies and interests, hence narrowing their world views and tolerance for differences (Hill and Hughes 1998; Papacharissi 2004).

One may identify the influence of the Habermasian model amid such conflicting evaluations. Scholars have vigorously studied the channel characteristics of the Internet against the ideals detailed by Habermas' public sphere theory, such as whether discussions hosted online are free and open to all; whether they are rational (use outside sources to back up claims); whether the participants are self-reflexive and reciprocal toward others, etc. As a result, some find the Internet to be hopeful for real



democracy (Barlow 2008; Barton 2005; Schneider 1996; Stromer-Galley 2000), while other scholars find it to be inadequate (Hill and Hughes 1998; Papacharissi 2004).

For those who come to positive conclusions, the Internet may re-create conditions for the initial emergence of the modern public sphere chronicled by Habermas. For example, Barlow (2008) argues that such civic media as blogs give voice to ordinary citizens and provide a buffer against commercial influences that have corrupted the public sphere. Coleman (2004) observes that the Internet opens up new space to connect the governmental agencies and the citizens. In that sense, the new technology has created more space and networks for citizens to channel their voices to the formal institutions, which is a major function of the public sphere. In terms of the quality of discourses, Coleman further points out that, contrary to stereotypical assumptions, online posts are very interactive, inclusive, and frequently cite outside sources.

Similar to such efforts supporting the democratizing potential of the Internet, “cyber skeptics” have also examined online political discussions using various configurations of standards based off of Habermas’ ideal type. As an example, Papacharissi (2004) argues that at the moment the Internet as a public space “is still plagued by the inadequacies of our political system” (p. 13). The author identifies three major areas of problems: information access, commercialization, and Internet fragmentation. With regard to the first factor, unequal distribution of wealth and resources could create unequal access to the technology, which breaks Habermas’ vision of an all-inclusive, egalitarian public sphere. Commercial influence, which led to the deterioration of the modern public sphere in Habermas’ narration and continues to encroach on the new media, is an equally important concern.

The more serious issue lying with the Internet for the cyber skeptics is fragmentation. Through their case study of the political Usenet groups and chat rooms, Hill and Hughes (1998) find that although people are seizing upon the increasing opportunities afforded by the Internet to talk about politics, they also mainly talk to ideologically like-minded people, which reinforces their political divide offline. Online discussion is segregated into small ideological groups lacking exposure to alternative opinions. Furthermore, Hill and Hughes find other undesirable features of online political discussion: the fast pace of chat room discussion does not invite thoughtful participation; information is largely absent in supporting claims; flaming is notable although not consuming.

Facing these competing evaluations based off of Habermas' ideal type, Weger and Aahkhus (2003) argue that simply dismissing the democratic potential of online discussion due to conflicting evidence is like seeing the glass half-empty. Although these two scholars also identify three major features of Internet chat rooms that are problematic for supporting critical discussion—a lack of conversational coherence, under-developed arguments, and flaming—they essentially view the chance of being exposed to diverse opinions and building social connection as the most significant contributions of the Internet. Other scholars have taken up these two aspects.

With regard to the diverse opinion environment, Dahlberg (2007) proposes a “radical democratic model of public sphere,” which also addresses the fragmentation thesis. The scholar points out that the traditional “public sphere discourse” assumption embodies an overall instrumental orientation, which views people as autonomous-rational individuals and ignores the intersubjectivity among them. This assumption also constructs consensus as the ultimate goal of communication and difference as a threat to social stability. The instrumental orientation, according to Dahlberg, gives rise to the fear of fragmentation, namely the existence of divergent spaces of opinions. The concern of the fragmentation thesis is that situating oneself in a particular space of like-minded people with similar opinions to one's own risks jeopardizing the convergence of different opinions toward a consensus in the general society. However, Dahlberg suggests that this assumption dismisses the role and importance of discussion with like-minded people.

Dahlberg ties this discussion to the potential issue of power embedded in Habermas' model. Because the public sphere theory privileges a particular rhetorical style, namely, rational-critical use of reason, not everyone with different resources and skills can participate in a space equally. Therefore, certain discourses may not gain popularity in face of a dominant discourse. In light of this power differential, the fragmentation of a gigantic Internet space into smaller enclaves of people who share similar opinions can indeed help with the articulation of counter-discourses. Rather than discarding Habermas' theory, Dahlberg's “radical democratic model” of the public sphere invites us to turn our attention away from how individuals compose diverse opinions in the digital sphere to the contestation between dominant groups' discourses and counter-discourses, from inequality in terms of individual access

and skills to that in terms of groups' networking resources in promoting alternative discourses online.

Dahlberg summarizes this idea into the notion of "discursive contestation," which Dahlgren (2005) reinforces in noting that although many scholars have reached the consensus that there are multiple public spheres, we should look into how these communicative spaces are connected and how alternative spaces representing diverse social groups contend for their voice to be heard. Dahlgren (2005) also speaks to the social connection effect championed by Weger and Aahkhus (2003), in suggesting that people do not just participate in the public discussion for instrumental purposes and serious deliberations. In providing a medium for "horizontal communication," the Internet also promotes interaction and connection among members of the society, which is meaningful in its social value.

These alternative viewpoints about the civic values of the Internet return to what the cultural citizenship perspective and aesthetic public sphere argument have brought forth: In addition to finding out whether people are discussing serious political issues online, we should not dismiss talk about personal stories and life situations; instead of counting how many times each person talks in a discussion, we should also pay attention to how a particular message contributes to the overall dynamic of the discussion with a thick description and textual analysis of such interrelations; rather than seeking a nationally unified public sphere in the cyberspace, we should take note of how underrepresented social groups find the sense of belonging in a particular forum while making cross-reference to discussions located in other online spaces. Mapping out such an intersubjective structure in online discourses promises a more informed view about actual public spheres emerging through the new digital media.

Although influential works contribute critical perspectives into the political implications of entertainment as well as the new digital media, many of them tend to repeat the simplistic divide between a celebratory stance and a dismissive evaluation. Furthermore, scholarly investigations into the Internet's democratic potentials have also largely reproduced a West-East divide, in that Western theories tend to serve as a set of normative standards against which ordinary people's use of the media is frequently measured. By that principle, outright censorship easily disqualifies many non-Western cyberspaces as hopelessly antidemocratic,

therefore inferior. This work aims at an organic and in-depth examination of Chinese audiences' interaction with entertainment texts. Rather than grafting theories onto the surface of audience activities and automatically assuming audience agency or passivity, I seek empirical depth in the digital universe that has become part of the Chinese audiences' everyday environment and provides rich materials for analysis. In doing so, the book is committed to more nuanced theoretical and empirical insights about the significance of entertainment experiences and the new media in everyday civic life. The goal is to transcend the often insurmountable optimism–pessimism, West–East dichotomies.

For the purposes of this book, I focus on audience exchanges channeled through Chinese Internet discussion forums and microblogging sites, as they provide the platform for many-to-many online discussion about the diversity of topics. Although in general China has a highly censored cyberspace, discussion forums and microblogging sites present a relatively more tolerant and inviting environment than the mainstream media or formal organizational Web sites.<sup>3</sup> They allow more space for ordinary citizens to exchange opinions among themselves. Most often, online discussion forums are provided by Web portals as part of their Internet services, such as email, news, and search engine. Their asynchronous, many-to-many structure often leads to spirited discussions with a large reach.

In making this empirical decision, my online data skews toward the relatively well-educated, young Chinese who reside in urban areas and how they use entertainment to reflect on their new life experiences. I choose to analyze in this book the four particular television shows and the Internet platforms about their reception, because of the spotlight they cast on new realities in contemporary China, which often disproportionately burden the younger generations and arise from China's ongoing urbanization process. However, in the case of *Super Girl*, I also draw from mainstream newspaper coverage, the authors of which may spread across the age spectrum, potentially correcting the age bias in my online data.

In studying the civic values of online discussion forums and emerging social media platforms, most research has only been focusing on explicit political forums or their political applications (Boulianne 2015; Coleman 2004; Dumitrica 2014; Hill and Hughes 1998; Miller et al. 2015; Shapiro et al. 2015; Stanley et al. 2004; Vesnic-Alujevic and Van Bauwel 2014) over those dedicated to pure aesthetic interests. A more culturally attuned

perspective such as cultural citizenship or aesthetic public sphere would give recognition to all forms of civic discourses, organized around all kinds of texts (Wu 2013, 2014). Still under heavy debate, even in developed Western democracies, is whether entertainment experiences and aesthetic evaluations of those experiences would spark any meaningful reflections about civic values and citizenship. While scholars have made theoretical efforts in developing these cultural perspectives, empirical evidence is urgently needed for the Internet. The aforementioned theoretical revisions would not limit their exploration only within the political sphere of online discussion. There is great potential in the aesthetic public spheres that are so closely embedded in the daily rituals of ordinary citizens. This project intends to take on such an empirical enterprise.

In this book, I explore how the Chinese audiences organize and exchange their entertainment experiences in public discourses, and how these experiences cross over from being purely aesthetic to shaping their civic values and molding their stances on public policies. In doing so, this work directly situates itself in the ongoing debates about entertainment media and political communication, contributing to the theories about public sphere, cultural citizenship, and aesthetic public sphere with robust empirical exploration. Furthermore, this work also speaks to the literature on new media and democracy, in enriching current perspectives about what constitutes political talk online, and what is the significance of the Internet as an alternative medium to the mainstream media for ordinary citizens. While the body of Internet research has yet to develop more qualitatively attuned methods to reveal more about the civic use of the Internet, the project adopts a more cultural perspective beyond basic content analysis, by mapping out the inner structure of the discourses through a qualitative discourse analysis and its intertextual connection with the formal public sphere. In the following section, I describe my empirical framework in detail.

## EMPIRICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE BOOK

In this section, I detail my sampling decisions and analytic process about all four television shows. The aesthetic public sphere theory inspires my empirical analysis toward a thick description of the social discourses and the use of iterative discourse analysis to uncover the patterns of connecting from aesthetic concerns to political reflections. As I discuss when entertainment-based discussions are deemed as rising from purely

aesthetic to political, the reader can grasp an empirically grounded perspective from the book to further examine their media experiences. Below, I describe in the first three subsections my sampling strategies for each individual show, and turn my attention to the analytic framework in the final subsection.

### *Super Girl*

Because the show took off (circa 2004–2005) largely before popular social media platforms did in contemporary China (around 2009), my sample was drawn from the discussion forum<sup>4</sup> embedded in the show's official Web site. Online discussion forums, although relatively antiquated in comparison with the contemporary social media juggernauts, were to some extent an earlier form of social media and are still enjoying a great deal of popularity in China and across the world. This analysis also provides a nice comparison with conclusions I can draw from other data, collected from a more recently developed social media outlet, Sina Weibo. In addition, for comparison between China's formal public sphere and its alternative ones created through new digital spaces, I also sampled all 108 articles from a variety of 36 national and local newspapers that covered *Super Girl* (SG) between July and September of 2009, available through the *People's Daily* electronic database.

*People's Daily* is the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Its official Web site boasts a comprehensive database of major national and local newspapers. To capture public discourses about SG at its historical juncture in 2009, when the show first came back from its hiatus and tried a dizzying array of measures to revive its brand under the formidable ban of audience voting, this book focuses on the three months in which national competitions took place. Auditions started in May and lasted until the end of June. The national competitions that narrowed from 18 contestants to the final winner took place every Friday, starting from June 26th and ending on September 4th. As a result of this schedule, attention started to focus more and more intensely on the show across the nation since July, after the national ten were selected on July 4th, building up to the final contest night on September 4th.

In sampling online discussions about SG during its 2009 season, I found a variety of major forums<sup>5</sup> dedicated to the talent show. Their popularity among the fans appeared similar, judging by the level of

activity on the forums. I selected Hunan TV *SG* forum as the primary forum for observation, as it is located on the official Web site of the TV network hosting *Super Girl*. Audience visiting the site for official information on the show may also be motivated to talk about their experiences here.

Online discussions between July and September 2009 amounted to a total of 3720 threads when sampling was conducted in late 2009. To keep my data to a manageable size, I randomly sampled 5% of these threads, narrowing the pool down to 187 threads. Then, to concentrate on threads that fostered attention and participation among the discussants, only those that received more than five response posts were kept. As a result, I gathered a total of 39 threads (545 posts). To keep faithful to my data, I limit findings to the range of my sampled newspaper pieces and online discussions. However, during the process of my analysis, I kept up with other social discourses circulated online, in the newspapers, and in my personal network, to stay informed about recent developments and maintain a larger perspective about the project.

### *If You Are the One*

While the data from *Super Girl* was the product of a random sampling process, I adopted a purposeful sampling step for *If You Are the One* (*IYATO*). Because this show is still being produced and broadcast since its 2010 debut, having generated almost 24,000 posts on its official Sina Weibo page<sup>6</sup> as of December 31, 2016, I have combed through all of the posts and their comments in roughly the first two years and a half of the show's six-year run, between March 18, 2010, and July 31, 2013, amounting to 10,850 posts. As *SG* constitutes the most comprehensive case in reflecting the tangle between entertainment and politics in contemporary China, I more purposefully look through the other three cases for particular topical connections. In the case of *IYATO*, I most closely look at connections that viewers drew between the show and developments in China's marriage landscape, most prominently the "leftover women" phenomenon, and related political commentaries. As I discuss the empirical details of *IYATO* in chapter five, under the general topic of China's media regulations and the future of its cultural industry, I sampled Weibo discussions about *IYATO*'s narrative evolution from a simple match-making show, implicitly for entertainment consumption, to a large-scale public service program.

While microblogging continues to garner much attention when it comes to contemporary social media use in China, readers will not only learn about how *IYATO* invites public discourses over living experiences that are most pressing for its viewers, but also gain updated knowledge about the workings of social media in China. As the most consistently recurring show among the four programs chosen for this book, *IYATO* embodies the most established presence on Sina Weibo. Since its first post on March 18, 2010, the page has garnered over four million followers and produced almost 40 posts per episode. Marquis et al. (2014) suggest that the skilled use of online interactions by the show's social media editors has also largely boosted its success.

### *Dwelling Narrowness and Naked Wedding*

The sampling process for *Dwelling Narrowness* (DN) and *Naked Wedding* (NW) resembled that for *IYATO*. Unlike the other two shows, these two drama series do not have recurring seasons and are no longer in running. The former ran in 2009, and the latter in 2011. However, they had a great impact on themes in Chinese television drama and still possess significant cultural relevance today, as one encounters frequent reference to the shows and to the two terms embodied by the show titles in people's reflections on their current life experiences. After searching for the keywords "TV drama *Dwelling Narrowness*" and "TV drama *Naked Wedding*" on Sina Weibo in December 2016, both return a sizable number of posts that go back to as far as Sina would retain the discussions.<sup>7</sup>

For DN, I analyzed 830 posts that spanned between 2009 and 2016. For NW, I analyzed 578 posts that spanned between 2011 and 2016. The starting point for both datasets was when the respective drama serial made their broadcast debut. Unlike SG or *IYATO*, I examined online discussions that extended into current social media conversations in the year of this book's writing, so that readers gain insights into both how the dramas provoked wide-reaching reflections during the time of their run, and how they remain culturally and socially relevant on the social media today.

### ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

Generally, people talk about a TV show first and foremost to express opinions about their viewing experiences. Therefore, it would not be surprising if the majority of talk centered around aspects of the shows



directly. However, my overarching research question takes a step further to examine *what else* people talk about when discussing the popular entertainment shows selected for this work. Are the discussions purely focused on the audience's aesthetic experiences, such as participant performance, drama story plots, and gossip? Do they also talk about other related but broader civic values—such as justice or democracy—or social issues, such as education or cultural policy? Do they reach into areas of universal values and broader social concerns? This requires reading into the deeper themes that were developed while aesthetic discussions were carried out. To answer this question, I used close textual analysis to discover the themes that ran through the newspapers and the online discussions.

First, I took a preliminary heuristic step in sorting through the newspaper pieces and online posts, during which I took note of articles and posts that landed on a more general level beyond the shows *per se*. For example, when an article was not just talking about who sang better on *Super Girl*, but also took the effort to define what is good music in general and what is lacking in the Chinese music industry, it was entered into a further round of thematic analysis. Similarly, when cultural critics and Internet discussants alike were not simply debating over specific story developments on the drama series, but expressed moral concerns about China's housing bubble and its social and political implications, these instances received more analytic attention as showing connection from aesthetic concerns to broader civic discourses.

The thematic analysis was also an iterative (and inductive) process. I read through all of the texts that were flagged earlier and paid particular attention to critical talk, the kind of discourses that might evoke an aesthetic public sphere. I operationalize “critical talk” as discourses that reflected people's imagination beyond the immediate context of specific media texts. In other words, such discourses would reveal the authors' critical awareness of broader civic issues and general conditions of the society. This definition is inspired by the theory of an aesthetic public sphere, which points to the connection between aesthetic concerns and themes of serious civic concerns and values. Specifically, the theory argues that aesthetic texts (often appearing in fictional forms and dramatic presentations) bear great similarity to real-life scenarios, therefore having an important connection to the latter.

During such a deep analysis, I paid attention to collective narratives that emerged out of individual texts and teased out more grand themes that bear on what it means to be a citizen, core values of the civil society, critical aspects of the political process, and serious social and cultural issues. Over time, I uncovered three most salient themes through an inductive route for the case of *Super Girl* and a purposeful reading in the other three cases: voting for the next super girl and political talk, stories of new generations and social justice, and general cultural concerns. This process of thematic analysis gave a nice structure to the discussions going in diverse directions. However, the themes are not mutually exclusive. For example, voting as part of the political debate (political theme) could be discussed as a way to avoid, or create space for, corruption (social justice); manipulation of scandals and controversies (social theme) was often treated as a major ailment that plagues Chinese cultural industry (cultural theme). However, each theme developed distinctive narratives about the Chinese society, politics, and culture, hence worthy of individual attention.

The next step in my deep discourse analysis focused on constructing a thick description of how these themes were developed. Within each theme, I read the texts closely and took note of aspects under the broad theme that the sampled texts touched on. For example, in going from selection on *Super Girl* to the expression of political values, I noticed that newspaper authors tended to do so in relation to some core political concerns, such as manipulation, representation, and fairness. This analytic attention enabled me to give a detailed description of how each theme was developed differently in the two public spheres, one mainstream formed by the newspapers, and one informal created through the Internet. As oftentimes pointed out to be a major flaw of online discussions, one is usually not able to find as strong or frequent narrative coherence in the online forums as one would in the mainstream media, such as newspapers. Some scholars attribute this difference to the fast pace of forum discussion which may not be particularly inviting for thoughtful participation (Hill and Hughes 1998). Caught in the moment of quick back-and-forth interaction, the participants may not be motivated to take as much time to think through everything and word the thoughts in a strictly logical manner as they would when composing a newspaper article. As a result, typos and illogical expressions are more common in the online sphere than in the newspapers.

Nevertheless, the cultural citizenship perspective would still value such a chance for ordinary citizens to express their opinions without much concern about what to say and how to say it. As with the thematic analysis, I intended to provide a thick description of how the dynamics differed between the two public spheres, and discuss ways in which the online forums may (or may not) help open up alternative spaces for ordinary citizens to voice their public opinions through their daily engagement in the public discussion about their aesthetic experiences.

In studying these two types of public discussions, one channeled in the mainstream newspapers and one hosted in online forums, this book takes up two central questions: *what* and *how*. What do newspaper contributors and online discussants talk about in discussing some most popular entertainment shows in contemporary China? How do ordinary people talk about their aesthetic experiences in the online forums and from there extend into the discussion about social issues and civic values? Do the discussions present a different dynamic from that in the formal public sphere? If so, how? The cultural citizenship and aesthetic public sphere perspectives suggest that aesthetic experiences are meaningful not just in terms of their entertainment value, but also in offering alternative spaces outside the restricted political public sphere. While the latter is not particularly tolerant of diverse and open civic voices, especially in authoritarian systems, informal public spheres dedicated to aesthetic experiences on the surface may open up channels for people's political communication.

In addressing the question of what, this work speaks directly to the debate about entertainment media and politics. If the discussions are primarily focusing on the aesthetic experiences, then they would be easily dismissed by critical theorists as meaningless and irrelevant. But the cultural citizenship perspective would not rush to that conclusion, as these superficial discussions serve as a foundation of association among the discussants in the first place. Then guided by the notion of an aesthetic public sphere, one would look further for signs of people being inspired by the discussions surrounding their aesthetic experiences to weave larger social discourses about civic issues and values. These embedded discussions, if found, can help demonstrate the significance of entertainment experiences for ordinary citizens to understand what it means to be a citizen and practice their civic thinking and skills.

Furthermore, ordinary citizens' participation in the public discourse can serve as a ritual aspect of their everyday life, in helping them

understand what it means to be a member of the civil society, what are the most important civic values, and how they experience social issues on a micro level. Therefore, the value of one's engagement in the public discourse does not have to be solely judged by how it is logically organized, how it helps to solve grand social issues, or how it promotes immediate political actions, as most media—especially Internet—and democracy studies primarily focus on.

In the chapters to follow, I answer the research questions through a thick description of how the formal and informal public spheres developed discourses around popular entertainment shows and in doing so connected from aesthetic experiences to narratives about more serious political values, social, and cultural concerns. In Chaps. 3–5, I take on each of the three themes: political, social, and cultural, in relation to the four individual cases.

## NOTES

1. Sina lifted this limit in January 2016.  
<http://tech.sina.com.cn/mobile/n/n/2016-01-29/doc-ixfnzanh0283828.shtml>.
2. It became popular in the 2000s to convert intransitive verbs into transitive verbs in public discourses to convey the passive nature in which citizens are forced into doing things by the Chinese state. In the instance of “disappearing someone,” the targeted individuals disappear against their own will, often as a result of the Chinese government’s secretive detention without publicly admitting it.
3. Major Web portals have recently started to require users to register and sign in with their real names before posting comments on the sites, potentially further deterring open and free conversations (Ansfield 2009).
4. <http://bbs.hunantv.com/frame.php?frameon=yes&referer=http%3A//bbs.hunantv.com/forumdisplay.php%3Ffid%3D515>. Accessed during my research from 2009 to 2013. As television networks started to renovate their digital presence and update to newer social media connections, Hunan TV does not operate its own online forums anymore and the forum that I analyzed in depth is no longer in operation, which created a unique historical analysis in my work. The majority of posts were shared amid the season developments.
5. For example, [bbs.hunantv.com](http://bbs.hunantv.com); [bbs.ent.qq.com](http://bbs.ent.qq.com); [tieba.baidu.com](http://tieba.baidu.com); [bbs.myspace.cn](http://bbs.myspace.cn); [sina.com](http://sina.com); [bbs.chaonv001.com](http://bbs.chaonv001.com); [bbs.ent.163.com](http://bbs.ent.163.com).

6. [http://weibo.com/p/1002061713458220/home?from=page\\_100206&mod=TAB&is\\_all=1#place](http://weibo.com/p/1002061713458220/home?from=page_100206&mod=TAB&is_all=1#place).
7. Sina Weibo tends to retain 30–50 pages of posts on the site for a particular search.

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