Weibo in China: Understanding its development through communication analysis and cultural studies

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Abstract

Weibo is considered to be the Chinese media phenomenon of 2010 and 2011. This paper provides a brief historical overview of microblogging in China and identifies the social and cultural roles held by Sina Weibo, a multimedia-enabled Weibo website. Using as case studies three of the most significant news items and events of 2010 and 2011 on the Weibo platform, we investigate how microblogging has been used in China and then analyse this using communication theories. Specifically, communication on Sina Weibo is examined in terms of impersonal–interpersonal–hyperpersonal interaction; individual–group–mass transmission fission; and communication interaction, taking into consideration the involvement of both the multimedia platform and citizen journalism. The final part of the paper discusses the relationship between Sina Weibo's development and Chinese culture—a factor that the authors believe must necessarily be considered in future studies of Weibo's growth.

Keywords: Sina Weibo, microblog, social media, *guanxi*, communication theory, Chinese culture.

Chinese internet development during the last few years has been characterised by the growth of Weibo, Chinese microblogging[1] services. As argued by Tai (2006), every stage of Chinese internet development has implications in relation to not only technological progress but also the government's approach towards and public participation on the internet. Different case studies have been carried out by scholars to examine social and politically linked phenomena relating to the Weibo platform during 2010 and 2011, and the dramatic changes during Weibo's development (for example, see Wang 2011; Wu 2011; Gao 2012;), but most of these case studies focus on single and specific Weibo issues, and very few researchers have attempted to provide a systematic overview of the important cases together. Furthermore, while past studies have examined both computer mediated communication (CMC) (for example, see Walther 1996; Schau & Gilly 2003; Hiltz, Johnson & Turoff 2006) and the interpretation of Weibo's communicative features (for example, see Ni 2011; Huang 2010), no research has provided a model of Weibo communication—a form of communication which is extremely meaningful to Chinese society when compared with other media and other types of information flows. The cultural values related to the success of Weibo—including one of the most important and interesting pillars within Chinese society, *guanxi* theory, a theory related to networks of influence—have been studied deeply

already (for example, see Hammond & Glenn 2004; Bell 2000; Luo 1997), but no great attention has been given to the link between Chinese internet trends and Chinese society based on these rooted cultural values.

The aim of this study is not only to understand the success of Weibo but also to discover the function of Weibo in Chinese society, especially in terms of the innovative method by which Weibo reached and influenced its mass audience. We attempt to analyse Weibo's performance in China, based on the background of the development of the internet and utilising three case studies. What emerges is a communication model through which to understand the flow of information on Weibo, as well as understandings of 1) why the Weibo platform was able to create a public sphere comprising an audience that no other media in China had reached before; 2) how Weibo participates in and changes the agenda-setting of China's media environment and 3) how Weibo can be successful in China, according to Chinese culture and Chinese social-network (*guanxi*) theory.

The internet in China: an overview

At the end of 2011, there were 244 million citizens who had a social networking site (SNS) account, which is an important fact—during 2011 the sector faced a slowdown in its growth (China Internet Network Information Centre [CNNIC] 2012, p. 29). The reduced number of users could be due to the typical Chinese approach to SNSs that are oriented to entertainment only: according to the latest trends, rather than prioritising entertainment, Chinese netizens are more involved in instant messaging, searching information and e-commerce. For this reason, the most important Chinese SNS began to implement new strategies and more diversified services offering the possibility to purchase goods, or setting up chat rooms in the same SNS. In the near future it will be possible to determine if the 'classical' SNS will coexist and be integrated in new platforms such as those for microblogs (in the case of Sina Weibo) and e-commerce.

An important trend recorded in 2011 was an increase in the number of microbloggers. According to a CNNIC report (2012, p. 29) numbers increased from 63 million in 2010, to 249 million in 2011—a 296% increase. Another important trend identified by CNNIC (2012, p. 17) is in use of the internet mobile phone—from 2010 to 2011 there was a recorded shift from 66.2% to 69.3% in terms of user uptake, and in this area the microblog phenomenon recorded an evident development confirmed by the index of usage, which reached 38.5% in December 2011 (an increase of 23% in one year) (CNNIC 2012, p. 17).

Sina Weibo: the king of microblogging platforms in China

Sina Weibo is unquestionably the most popular microblogging service in China and its story has come to the attention of many, even beyond national borders. This interest expressed outside China is the reason why some official analysts claim that Sina Weibo could become a serious competitor of Twitter, the world's most famous microblogging service (for example, see Epstein 2011; Estes 2011).

But Sina Weibo's success is not actually as recent as it appears. Its history goes back to the twentieth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests when Twitter and its first domestic knockoffs were shut down; while some services were allowed

back online several weeks later, others, like Twitter, can still not be accessed in China.

The second and definitive shutdown of these services occurred during the Urumqi riots (in Xinjiang) in 2009 and this time all the microblogging services were closed. It is important to note that the sector was healthy at the time—indeed, Twitter had found strong competition in regional services such as Fanfou. Fanfou, one of the first successful Chinese microblogging platforms, was taken offline one week after the Urumqi riots, while another service, Digu, which many Fanfou users moved to, was inaccessible for 99 days, with the only official explanation being that it was 'closed for server upgrading' (Martinsen 2009).

It was just before the riots, in this microblogging vacuum, that Charles Chao, Sina's Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, in June 2009, confirming the cancellation of Sina Corp's ambitious plans for Pengyou[2], launched an SNS and a new project: a new microblogging service at a time when the government seemed extremely concerned about the phenomenon.

Sina Weibo was officially launched in August 2009. According to Liu Gengyun, one of the authors of the '2010 Annual Report on China Microblogging', 'the year of 2010 is known as the first year of the development of Chinese microblogs' (cited in *People's Daily Online* 29 Dec. 2010). In general, microblogging as a phenomenon attracted widespread media attention and, according to a report published by the China Youth Daily Social Investigation Center (cited in *People's Daily Online* 29 Dec. 2010), in 2010 94.3% of the people who responded to its questionnaire indicated that microblogging had changed their lives: 87.3% said that they log on to the service to find out what other people think about public events or news and to comment on them, while 62.5% said they took part in the search for missing persons, prayers and other activities launched by the services.

In its first 66 days of operation, Sina Weibo amassed one million users, and by its eighth month (April 2010) this number had reached 10 million (Farley 2011). On 20 October 2010, it announced that it had topped 50 million registered users in just 14 months of operations (Farley 2011). This trend seems set to continue in the near future—Ali Yong, a marketing manager at Sina, announced at the DCCI Adworld 2011 advertising conference that Sina's microblogging service was growing by 10 million users a month, and the company confirmed that the platform had 60,000 verified accounts, which identify the official account of a famous person or organisation (Farley 2011). This figure is important because one of Sina Weibo's most successful strategies has been to encourage movie stars, singers and famous business and media celebrities to join the platform and some of these people now have millions of followers.

Meanwhile, the microblog vacuum represents an evident advantage for Sina. Sina Weibo is the indubitable sector leader. According to a 2011 report published by RedTech Advisors (a Shanghai-based advisory firm), Sina Weibo accounts for 57% of all Chinese microblog users and 87% of the country's entire microblogging activity (Chao 2011). Even though the number of competitors has continued to rise in recent years, Sina Weibo's growth has not faltered. Announcing Sina's unaudited financial results for the second quarter of 2011, Charles Chao confirmed that 'Weibo.com has become an online phenomenon with registered accounts recently surpassing 200 million' (quoted in *PR Newswire* 2011). To celebrate this

outstanding success, Sina decided to put its Weibo logo on the NASDAQ screen with the greeting 'share happiness with 200 million people here' (Lu 2011). Then, on 19 September 2011, Charles Chao declared that Sina Weibo users would soon outstrip the Sina portal ones (Sina.com 2011; Zhang 2011). According to the international statistics provider Alexa (cited in Zhang, Q. S. 2011), at that point in time Sina Weibo was the seventh most visited website in China. Sina Weibo grew as a mainstream media, with 750 million news items published on the service every day, a number that, according to Charles Chao, will continue to grow during 2012 (Sina.com 2011).

Sina Weibo has the typical features of a microblogging platform but has been more successful than others due to both a lack of competitors and the promotion of the support of Sina, one of the most popular web portals in China: it is a hybrid system for both broadcasting and developing interactive communication. This is the characteristic that has made Weibo one of the most reliable information sources for many Chinese netizens. According to the 'Internet Real-Time Public Opinion Index Annual Report 2011', microblogging platforms like Sina Weibo are the third-favourite online news source in China (cited in Zhang, Yang & Meng 2011).

At the Third Global Mobile Internet Conference held in Beijing, Charles Chao announced that Sina Weibo would develop along the lines of SOLOMO, an abbreviation of SOcial, LOcal and MObile (cited in *Guanmingwang* 2011). In regard to social issues, it is important to note that microblogging is a social communication platform based on weak relationships—Sina Weibo's aim is not to reflect real relationships that exist in real society (indeed it better promote the connection between users who post interesting news and information and users who are interested in following specific topics) (cited in *Guanmingwang* 2011).

Three categories of Weibo practice through case studies

To better understand how Weibo, and Sina Weibo in particular, have operated in their golden age between 2010 and 2011, we have prepared case studies that illustrate three ways in which Sina Weibo is used. The studies cover Weibo's role in journalism, its role as a platform for opinion leaders, and its role as a public administration tool.

1. **Weibo's role in journalism: fostering civic engagement to achieve just outcomes**

The Yihuang demolition story is a noteworthy example of Weibo's participation in journalism. There have been several forced demolition cases happening in China during the past few years, with local government selling land to estate companies for new constructions, but without the consent of the home owner, nor negotiation with them for compensation provided by the local government. In Yihuang, the owners, the Zhong family, opposed the demolition, but at the cost of three people receiving burns, and one death. On 16 September 2010, sisters Zhong Rucui and Zhong Rujiu were on their way to Beijing to give an interview on Phoenix TV (based in Hong Kong) but were stopped by government officials at Nanchang Airport. The sisters fled into the women's rest room and called journalist Liu Chang, from *Caixin Magazine*. Liu immediately informed Deng Fei, from the *Phoenix Weekly*, and Deng began reporting on the sisters' situation on Weibo

(Deng 2010). The instant updates on Weibo caught the attention of netizens around China and prompted Zhong Rujiu to open her own Weibo account.

She opened her account on Sina Weibo on 17 September 2010 and by 27 September 2010 she had 28,872 followers (*Tencent News* 28 Sep. 2010), meaning that every message she sent had 28,872 direct viewers plus many more secondary viewers.

In the wake of the increasing online concern and social pressure, the supervision and surveillance intervention in relation to government executives finally led to local officials being brought to account.

2. **Weibo's role as a platform for opinion leaders: individual power to social impact**

In 2009, there was a nationwide police crackdown on human trafficking and, according to the Ministry of Public Security, they found more than 6700 children (Phoenix TV 2 Mar. 2011). Yu Jianrong's Weibo campaign brought this serious social issue back into the public eye in early 2011.

China's Spring Festival in 2011 was different from those of the past because of a famous Weibo blogger, Professor Yu Jianrong, who launched a Weibo campaign called 'Taking pictures to save child beggars in the street' (2011). Yu Jianrong is a professor at the China Rural Development Research Center of the China Academy of Social Sciences and a renowned expert of rural and social problems in China. Yu began to post on Sina Weibo on 9 October 2010 and his 'name' and reputation attracted more than 200,000 followers in just three months, in the lead-up to the Spring Festival ('Taking pictures to save child beggars in the street' Weibo page, 2011). This is why his post on Weibo on 17 January 2011 about Yang Weixin's mother's appeal for help to find her missing son had such an impact on the internet community. One netizen soon replied to the post, sending a picture of a child who looked very much like Yang Weixin begging in a street in Xiamen, Fujian Province. The Yang family quickly headed to Xiamen to search for their son, taking this photo with them.

After this case, on 25 January, Yu Jianrong opened his new Weibo account (Taking pictures to save child beggars in the street), calling on netizens and Weibo users to take pictures of the children they saw begging in the street, no matter where, and to share them on the social media platform so that they could be matched with police databases or recognised by parents.

The campaign reached its peak on 8 February when it helped Peng Gaofeng find his son who had been abducted three years earlier (Sina News 9 Feb. 2011). This surprising success encouraged netizens to take a more active part in the campaign and parents to look for information on Weibo. Although there were contrasting opinions about the campaign and about whether this exposure could harm the children who were still in the hands of their exploiters (see *The Beijing News* 8 Feb. 2011), Yu Jianrong's name and his Weibo campaign became the hottest social topics at the beginning of 2011. An increasing number of ordinary people were taking photos or videos for publication on Weibo to try to help parents find their missing children. Just 14 days after the campaign began, 2000 messages (including photos) had been received and six children had been found and returned to their

parents with the help of the police (Lv 2011; Zhengzhou Evening News 10 Feb. 2011).

This case shows the power an individual can wield through Weibo, and demonstrates how Weibo, as a launchpad for opinion leaders, was used as a media technology to set the social agenda—words and ideas were put into practice with the engagement of netizens (citizens) and government bodies (police), and this resulted in reaching a beneficial goal for society.

3. Weibo's role as a public administration tool: keeping netizens informed

Since 24 February 2010, when 21 local cities' Public Security Bureau in Guangdong province opened its official Weibo account (*People.com News* 26 May 2010), government offices in different departments and different provinces around China have begun to open accounts to 'provide information and service to the public, control public-relations crises and to react on negative news' (author translation of BaiduBaike 2011).

Besides making regular informative posts, public administration Weibo pages also play an important role in emergencies, like on 27 September 2011 when there was an accident on the Shanghai underground. The Shanghai Subway Office used their Weibo page as an information board for the public, but in a dramatic way. It took 40 minutes for the official Shanghai Metro Weibo page to publish the first announcement of the accident, and during those 40 minutes it refreshed three other posts suggesting that passengers avoid the line involved, without making any reference to the accident. The apology posted was deleted, reappeared, was deleted again and then finally reappeared—public administration Weibo is still learning the ropes.

A communication attribute analysis of Weibo

Weibo: impersonal–interpersonal–hyperpersonal communication interaction

Based on a survey conducted by DRATIO and the Beijing Association of Online Media (2010), the 'Weibo's media attribute and users applied situation survey', and another conducted by Ni (2011) on Weibo users, it is clear that the 'Self-expressing' group is the main Weibo user group (see table below).

Weibo user group classification

Group	Group distribution	Usage type
Self-expressing writer	46.4%	Express personal ideas and mood
Active social networker	16.2%	Keep social network with others
Discussion participator	16.4%	Follow hot topics
Silent part	21.0%	Mostly glance at others' Weibo

Source: DRATIO and Beijing Association of Online Media (2010)

For the silent majority, Weibo is an open platform where everyone can form their own opinions within the limit of 140 text characters. Schau and Gilly (2003, p. 388) suggest that personal website consumers 'consistently state that their sites enact selves with which they choose to communicate with other Web participants'.

This need to 'enact' self-identity, coupled with flexible access (via internet or mobile phone), has created an impersonal communication model on Weibo with four 'A' factors—Anytime, Anywhere, Anyone and Anything—which has made Weibo a flowing internet apparatus that allows users possibilities to express themselves in the best way (Sun & Zhang 2008, p. 51).

Hofstadter (1986, p. 782) describes such identity creation as 'a dialogue between two persons both of whom are inside me, both of whom are genuinely myself, but who are at odds, in some sense, with each other'. Thus, the identities of Weibo opinion leaders can be related partly to their real identities and partly their constructed 'ideal' identities they use to communicate on this platform.

CMC is described by Walther (1992 [2010]) as a lean medium that is efficient for effective communication when messages are very simple or clear. He also suggests that in synchronous CMC 'immediate feedback from others—both verbal and nonverbal—is available to speakers in order to make their messages clearer and enhance others' understanding' (Walther 1992 [2010], p. 388). Weibo communication represents some characteristics of CMC messages, with simple or unequivocal messages following a communication process from sender to different layers of receivers. There are two functions on Weibo facilitating synchronous interpersonal communication: the 'private message' function allows users to chat with each other in real-time or send pictures, voice messages and videos, while the 'comment' function on Weibo allows receivers to discuss opinions directly with the message sender. Besides functions allowing users to broadcast messages on their own accounts, Weibo offers another 'asynchronous' interpersonal communication function called 'forward/re-tweet' that Weibo users can use to forward the message to their own Weibo page, share with other people and thus have their version of the message re-forwarded or re-re-forwarded by other Weibo users. And this is where there is a link between self-discovery and social acceptance in a one-on-one and one-to-many interactive online setting.

Walther (1996) proposed a hyperpersonal communication model for CMC studies, partly drawing on Goffman's (1959, p. 19) claim that individuals may present themselves 'in any setting as a performance designed to achieve a particular impression'. According to Walther (1996, pp. 17–27), there are four different but related elements in hyperpersonal CMC: the receiver, the sender, asynchronous channels of communication and feedback. In Walther's theory, '[w]ith more time for message construction and less stress of ongoing interaction, users may have taken the opportunity for objective self-awareness, reflection, selection and transmission of preferable cues' (Walther 1992 quoted in Walther 1996, p. 19). Meanwhile, CMC receivers are said to inflate the perceptions they form about their (online) partners as they 'engage in an "overattribution" process' through which 'they build stereotypical impressions of their partners without qualifying the strength of such impressions in light of the meager information […] on which they are built' (Walther 1996, p. 18). This hyperpersonal communication is unavoidable in CMC practices, including Weibo. Not only opinion leaders who need to create a more attractive or persuasive identity for their followers but also the 46.4% of self-expressing Weibo users (see table above) who write on Weibo to share their life, mood, happiness and loneliness, are all consciously or

unconsciously fashioning how they want to be perceived, and are potentially being perceived within a framework of 'overattribution'.

This is clear from the case study of public administration Weibo—messages are all drafted with utmost care because they are the window of the administrative bureau through which citizens can see inside. It is a positive 'open' platform with which the government can communicate with the people and help form public perceptions of its identity.

Importantly though, public perceptions may not align with the ideal identity the administrative bureau seeks to convey. Take the underground accident in Shanghai: although the Shanghai Subway Office published a sincere apology on its Weibo page, this statement came after a rather clumsy operation (appear-disappear-appear-disappear-appear). As *People's Daily Online* (29 Sep. 2011) reported, 'There were 7 or 8 people involved in the official Weibo publication about this accident and this is Shanghai Metro's first ever serious accident—we are feeling stones to cross the river' (author translation of original text).

For these public administration Weibo accounts, there is always a group of people who discuss, modify, write, edit, change and examine the Weibo posts in order to make the presentation as flawless as possible. This further demonstrates what Potter & Banaji (2012) observed in individual use of personal blogs. They describe the blog space 'as a space in which they [the individuals] presented and represented aspects of themselves within a performative context' (Potter & Banaji 2012, p. 88). Weibo is like that—selective personal narratives and the reshaping of one's self-identity are possible through multifaceted management of the hyperpersonal communication layer.

On the Weibo platform, the three layers of communication (impersonal, interpersonal and hyperpersonal) normally act simultaneously and in an intertwined way, and this is why Weibo can be so effective in disseminating information and creating new ways of communicating.

Weibo: individual–group–mass transmission fission

The two main groups on a Weibo profile are 'Following' and 'Follower'. In the 'Following' group the user can choose anyone who interests them, and all updates from the person they 'follow' will appear on the user's Weibo page; in the 'Followers' group the user can choose and see whom these updates are being shared with. This group-observing and group-sharing is the core of Weibo's communication—'89% of Weibo users choose "Following" for their friends, classmates, colleagues, and partners' (DRATIO & Beijing Association of Online Media 2010).

'There are three main types of groups on Weibo more generally: personal-social-network group, topic group, and workplace group' (DRATIO & Beijing Association of Online Media 2010). Based on Lin's (2009) interpretation of Deaux's 1996 description of online newsgroup interaction, participation in Weibo can be said to also 'have the benefits of allowing individuals to find group-identification and to increase their self-esteem' (Lin 2009, p. 571). Lin (2009, p. 571) claims that

… the ability of individuals to share their ideas, opinions, knowledge, inner thoughts and perhaps an idealized self-image in an uninhibited manner, due to the anonymous nature of these newsgroups, provides these individuals a safe outlet to feel socially connected and to establish themselves as part of a meaningful community in society.

This is exactly what Weibo offers.

   But Weibo's individual–group connection does not circulate only inside the 'group' itself like the enclosed 'newsgroups' in Deaux's description; since every Weibo user has their own 'Following' and 'Follower' group, there is always a possibility to share posts not only within the same group of users but also with others outside this group. Outsiders may generate this sharing with another group of users. This connection may go on perpetually, as seen in Figure 1.
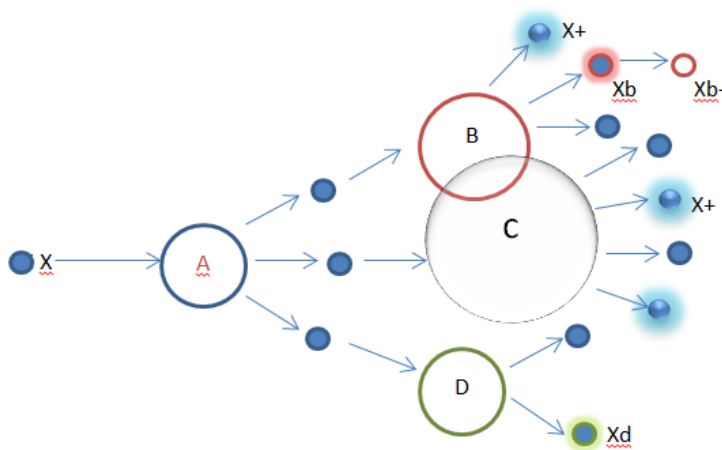

Figure 1. Weibo's communication model.

When a Weibo message (represented by the smallest nodes) reaches user A or is generated by A, this message may reach A's followers such as B, C and D; user B may share some followers with user C, and not share any followers with user D, but B, C, D may all transmit or share the same message again with their followers, and continue to share with more users.

   Using this example, we can clearly see how communication through Weibo starts from an individual sharing with their follower groups and then, after several layers of group sharing, the message may reach the mass. This is not like traditional mass media such as newspapers, radio and television, which use the one-to-many mass communication model, nor is it like other online SNSs, which exploit the mutual interaction communication model. Instead, it is like a process of fission in which the message's energy can be transmitted powerfully and rapidly. If we assume all the users have 100 followers, practically speaking, A's message can reach all of them, and if only 10% of A's followers choose to share and republish the message (including B, C and D), then A will have 10 forwarders of this message (first layer). If each of these new forwarders has 100 followers in their group, A will

have 10×100 receivers of the message (second layer). 10% of these 1000 may then share this message with their groups for another 100×100 receivers (third layer) and this number can grow in the way illustrated in Figure 1.

The case study regarding Weibo's participation in journalism shows how this fission process works in practice. Just 10 days after Zhong Rujiu opened her Weibo account on Sina, she already had 28,872 followers, which means that 28,872 people potentially read her posts and perhaps forwarded them to their own Weibo groups.

Weibo: multimedia platform and involvement in civil journalism

Huang Shuo (2010) developed another model to describe Weibo's multi-layer communication (Figure 2). From this model we can see that 'other media platforms' play an important role in the third phase of Weibo mass-to-mass communication; this means that (in Figure 1) when A's original message X is transmitted to the third layer, following B, C, D, the original message may already have been adapted into a different message X+, which becomes 'three-dimensional' because more information or details are added from other media platforms such as photos, videos, news reports from other newspapers or television, and so on.

From Figure 1, we can see that when a message transforms from X to X+ through multimedia integration, some other forwarded messages may transform from X to Xb or Xd due to B and D's personal participation. This participation can take the form of comments on the original message or the input of personal resources providing information about the original one. In this case, the original message X will be changed into Xb with B's identified transformation, and all the
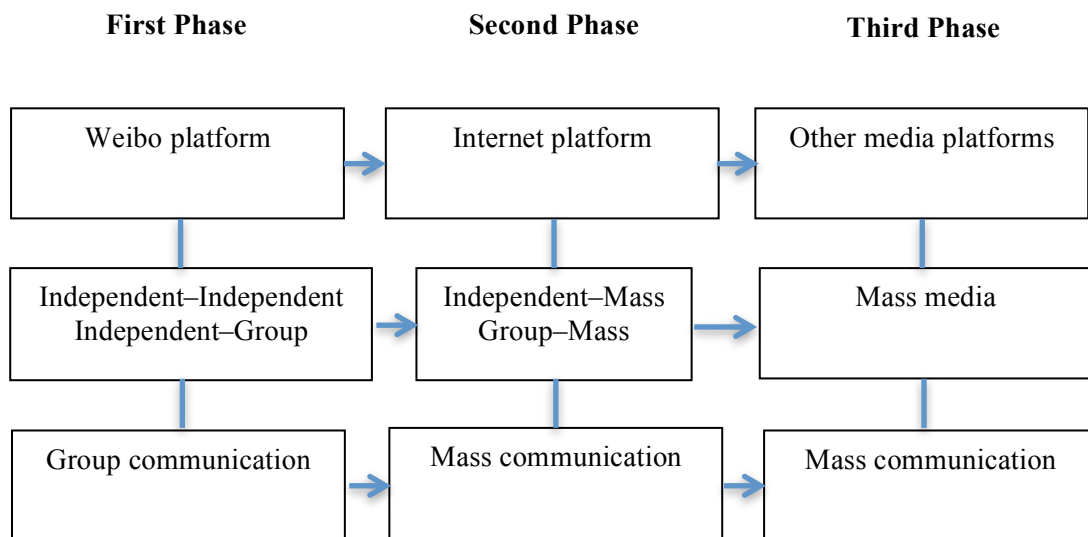
First Phase	Second Phase	Third Phase
Weibo platform	Internet platform	Other media platforms
Independent–Independent Independent–Group	Independent–Mass Group–Mass	Mass media
Group communication	Mass communication	Mass communication

Figure 2. Weibo's multi-layer communication (Huang 2010)

followers of B will follow the process on, on the basis of message Xb instead of the original message X. Thus, even in some cases where the original message is blocked or deleted due to the information filter system, this kind of personal-

participant information will continue its transmission, carrying interpretations from different 'amateur journalists'. For example, during Yu Jianrong's campaign, there were original messages that described the appearance of one child the Weibo user A saw in the street, represented in Figure 1 as message X. After, B and C forwarded this original message on their Weibo accounts, one of C's followers may have added the picture of the same child, changing the message into X+. At the same time, B may have added their comment to the original message, which then became Xb and then transferred to B's followers. After this, even when the original message is filtered, B's comment will still remain on the Weibo platform and continue its transmission process as message Xb-. The participation of Weibo users (especially those who added more information to the original message) means that each can be observed as a netizen journalist, or amateur journalist, who

> … challenges as well as supplements the role of the traditional media as the sole holder of the 'truths' […] by breaking stories that [are] of interest to the public but [are] either neglected or not uncovered by the press.

> (Lin 2009, p. 577)

The risk is that it may also be blurred by uncensored information. Like the internet, where 'the relative advantage of the […] communication medium lies in its technology fluidity' (Lin 2009, p. 568)—Weibo works as a multimedia integration that 'enables its users to access, distribute, exchange and receive information in multimedia and multiplatform modalities—of which, some embody greater social presence and information cues—to allow them to multitask in a networked environment' (Lin 2009, pp. 568–9).

Nonetheless, it is obvious that Weibo's participation in journalism would not be possible without the involvement of other media—even Yu Jianrong's Weibo campaign may not have lasted such a long time without the concern and support of other media. In the Yihuang case there were additional news reports.

With the huge social change taking place in China in recent years, the public is indeed 'more engaged and hungry for information' (Bandurski 2011) because they want to understand the social changes that will affect their living conditions, especially when there is a discrepancy, or problem. The public, as defined by Blumer (1946 cited in Price & Allen 1990, p. 387), is 'any group of people who face a situation requiring collective action and who discover that they disagree over how they should meet the problem'. But the fact is that Chinese citizens have faced many problems and there have been very few ways for them to take part in the media's agenda-setting process or start any collective action because the mass media is centralised and in the hands of the government. After Weibo's short but explosive development, citizens saw how powerful it could be from the example of Yu Jianrong's campaign and the media agenda-setting by their beloved grassroots scholar. They also understood this power when they saw and were satisfied with the fact that the government officials had to resign from their jobs because of the public outcry on Weibo. The Weibo public finally started to represent a social force with the capability to work some magic on the real stage of society. The Yihuang case was one of the first real opportunities for Weibo to take part in a serious news issue both as a news medium and as a public-opinion medium.

Sina Weibo's success based on its Chinese cultural background

Besides the particular communication models that underpin how Weibo is used, other aspects drive Weibo's success as a new medium. For instance, in relation to how this seed is successfully growing in China, Weibo exemplifies a crucial merging of China's media and cultural background.

A comparative study by Fong and Burton (2006) shows important differences between American and Chinese consumers in the cultural context. Americans base their trust on their individual knowledge and experience with products, while Chinese place more importance on their networks, and on the exchange of favours between members of the same networks. Chinese consumers find their main source of information in their reference group and interaction here is seen as "relationship enhancement behavior" (Wong, Chan & Leung quoted in Fong & Burton 2006). The Chinese scenario differs from the American one, which is more individualistic and in which participants may be more vocal online—in other words, Americans are more used to providing more information (Fong & Burton 2006). For example, studies of Chinese about information searching claim that

> Chinese consumers were likely to search more and rely more heavily on personal sources of information than American consumers, who did less directed search, and relied more on their internal knowledge and personal experience with products'. Doran [2002] suggested that the Chinese, living in a collectivistic culture, were less likely to make individual decisions and more likely to let reference groups influence choices, while the Americans were more individualistic and were more likely to make their final decisions alone.

> (Fong & Burton 2006)

This supports another study (Wong, Chan & Leung 2005 cited in Fong & Burton 2006) that found that 'collectivist societies regard information sharing as a way to share favors, while individualistic societies tend to focus on self-reliance'. This can also be seen in a quantitative study published by HP Labs (Yu, Asur & Huberman 2011), which states that Chinese microbloggers are 'more inclined to share and propagate trivial content than the Twitter users' (Yu, Asur & Huberman 2006, p. 7). Similar findings are also reported in a survey of social 'question and answer' (Q&A) behaviour, another comparative study that explores cultural differences in people's Q&A behaviour across Western (United States and United Kingdom) and Asian countries (China and India) (Yang, Morris, Teevan, Adamic & Ackerman 2011). In this analysis, the same difference also emerged between the two areas: 'Western cultures are associated with an analytic and low-context cognitive pattern, along with individualism, while Asian cultures are associated with a holistic, high-context cognitive pattern, along with interdependence and collectivist social orientation' (Nisbett et al. 2001 and Varnum et al. 2010 cited in Yang et al. 2011, p. 1). According to the results of the Q&A survey, Chinese netizens prefer to use SNS for social goals (Yang et al. 2011, p. 1). It is important to analyse Sina Weibo bearing in mind the difference between individualism represented by Western cultures and collectivism in Asian cultures, and, more specifically, Western

cultures' values related to 'independence, individualism, autonomy and self-achievement' (Yang et al. 2011, p. 2). Collectivist societies form their basis on values like 'interdependence, harmony, relatedness and connection', and in cultures in countries like China people prefer to establish and keep 'long-term and multifaceted relationships that have high value and distinct boundaries' (Yang et al. 2011, p. 2) and that support their social goals. Under these circumstances, they use 'implicit and high-context information' to communicate (Yang et al. 2011, p. 2.). Western societies differ because of their 'explicit communication style, […] short and low-commitment relationships, linear time manner and high uncertainly avoidance' (Yang et al. 2011, p. 2).

As Sina Weibo is the medium that contributed to spreading information in all the case studies we focused on, it is important to correctly define its services. Indeed, if Sina Weibo is considered an important source of information then it can be studied as a social media platform; on the other hand, empirical studies have shown that most Web 2.0 platforms (like Sina Weibo) are less oriented towards supporting information and in this case it would be more correct to call it a social network. In either case, it should be noted that the importance of a socially bonded culture could foster a more efficient mechanism of social assistance, such as undirected social reciprocity even if in most cases, according to the majority of social network theories, the Chinese tend to rely on their own network. It can be argued that the Chinese place importance on responsibility for the collective, drawing on a Confucian background that seems to reflect in the virtual sphere the real Chinese culture and society.

Another important pillar existing in both Chinese society and Chinese cyberspace needing to be mentioned here is the concept of *guanxi*; that is, a social network theory that contextualises individuals within a highly collectivist society. In fact, *guanxi* refers to a specific social structure, whereby its function is to ensure 'security, trust and a prescribed role' (Hammond & Glenn 2004, p. 24). Furthermore**,** social network development has generated interest and intensive debate among scholars of social interaction in sectors such as 'sociology, communication, management and marketing [and important discoveries have been made in the study of] group behaviours using social network theory' (Hammond & Glenn 2004, p. 24)

It is true that 'social network theory explains how information and relationships develop within the context of active social groups in self-organizational communities' (Hammond & Glenn 2004, p. 24). Sina Weibo exemplifies Hammond and Glenn's (2004) theory, according to which there are several similarities between the *guanxi* system and the main activities on Chinese social networks. In fact, Sina Weibo and *guanxi*, share some important features that characterise social systems: the 'overlapping conceptualizations' of information and sustainability, change and emergence, and order and chaos (Hammond & Glenn 2004, p. 24).

The first scenario presented by Hammond and Glenn (2004, p. 24), 'information and sustainability' underlines the importance of information that is considered fundamental in supporting a social system. *Guanxi* and social network theory share a fixed range of actions and mannerisms that define the flow of information and determine *guanxi* (insider and outsider relationships), or strong and weak links

(Hammond & Glenn 2004, p. 24). Consequently, the social network is heavily influenced by both types of relationships.

The second conceptualisation, 'change and emergence', states that relationships can be characterised by 'constancy or change' (Hammond & Glenn 2004, p. 24). This leads to a state of change or emergence, and, thus, change in information flow brings change in social order. *Guanxi* and social network theory confirm that 'order is created by trust as a local, relative phenomen[on]' in which the theory of change is linked to 'an ethic of sustainability' (Hammond & Glenn 2004, p. 24).

The last conceptualisation presented by Hammond and Glenn (2004, p. 24) highlights the importance of 'order and chaos', both included in *guanxi* and social network theory. In this case it is worth stressing the fact that *guanxi* is more oriented to support trust over chaos.

Many definitions have been given to the term *guanxi* but some are better suited to the social network theory and to Sina Weibo in particular. For example, Yadong Luo (1997, p. 44) writes that:

> The Chinese word *guanxi* refers to the concept of drawing on connections in order to secure favors in personal relations. It is an intricate and pervasive relational network which Chinese cultivate energetically, subtly, and imaginatively.

This definition could apply in all three case studies described in this paper.

The same could be said for the definition proposed by Bell, who says that *guanxi* relates to 'relationship in the most profound sense of the term, with implications that are beyond the customary English usage' (Bell 2000 quoted in Hammond & Glenn 2004, p. 25).

It is undeniable that Sina Weibo's development is based on *guanxi* because it 'has many of the superficial characteristics of social networks'; in fact '*guanxi* is transferable' [author emphasis added] (Hammond & Glenn 2004, p. 25). As shown in Weibo's communication model illustrated in Figure 1, if we assume that B, C and D all know A, and that B and C know each other because they share some *guanxi,* then D, even if that individual doesn't share any common *guanxi* (in the sense of direct connection) with B and C, is still 'socially obligated because they are [in] the same network' as A (Hammond & Glenn 2004, p. 25). In other words, *guanxi* is 'the micro connection to the macro social order' (Hammond & Glenn 2004, p. 26). It is again Yadong Luo (cited in Hammond & Glenn 2004, p. 26) who says that *guanxi* 'gives social status and defines how the individual should operate, related to the larger social system'.

Of course, *guanxi* is only an example to express the importance of Chinese culture and society in the Sina Weibo success story. Further and more in-depth studies should be carried out in future to gain a better understanding of Chinese microblogging and to develop a more detailed comparative approach with Western microblog platforms, bearing in mind that, as demonstrated in previous social network studies, culture matters.

Conclusion

Weibo is a new system of communication in China, with a very short history but with a far-reaching and uniform growth. Its development has been supported by a mix of socially significant events and technological progress.

We decided to use case studies because they represent the best way of understanding Weibo's role in Chinese society and the most effective way of describing Weibo's participation in different social issues. Weibo is the most active medium ever in China and has the most energetic support of netizens; it has also gradually become a useful medium with which the masses can join in or understand media agenda-setting and is an influential stage where the public can finally have a chance to 'see' society as a whole and its changes.

These case studies also illustrate the communication model Weibo incorporates, including fission expansion from the individual to intertwined groups and, finally, to the masses. With the inclusion of a multimedia platform, Weibo expands its content boundary, providing users with a multi-dimensional way of being involved in civic journalism. We have also shown that Weibo's success in China relies on such a communication model and, above all, on the fission process, since the message can reach the masses powerfully and rapidly (during which any modifications or intention to interrupt the communication process would be nigh on impossible).

In the end, we have attempted to explore the cultural background of Chinese society to understand Weibo, focusing on the importance of *guanxi* roots and the cultural differences between West and East that led to the different expansion of Twitter and Sina Weibo, respectively the most important microblog platforms in the West and in China.

Notes

1 According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2011, p. 106), microblogging is a subset of blogging that uses shorter content, normally text-based, and small file sizes. Microblogs 'allow users to exchange small elements of content such as short sentences, individual images, or video links' (p. 106). In most cases, including the Sina Weibo service that is the focus of this paper, the microblog space allows a maximum 140 textual characters for every message.

2 Pengyou Tencent is a social network service lunched by Tencent in 2008. It was first called QQ Xiaoyou (QQ Classmates) because its main users were college students. Afterwards, in 2011, it was renamed Pengyou (Friends).

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