Online collective action in China: a new integrated framework

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abstract The popularity of the Internet and online activism provides a revolutionary channel for Chinese people to express themselves and participate in politics. However, the existing research provides differing perspectives. This article attempts to integrate the demand-supply model with relevant studies from both China and abroad, as well as offer a systematic analysis of the demand, supply, and mobilization of online collective action to further understand the phenomenon and develop collective action theories based on Western countries. The impact of this new form of political participation on social development in China is discussed and questions are raised concerning future research.

keywords demand ◆ mobilization ◆ online collective action ◆ supply

Introduction

Due to paternalistic governments and the lack of social and political trust, political participation in socialist and communist regimes has long been associated with apathy, alienation, inefficiency, or even a sense of learned political helplessness (Gaidytė, 2012; Gaidytė and Muis, 2015). This situation changed when Information and Communication Technology (ICT) became available worldwide. Citizens now prefer to use new channels and forms of activism to discuss or to make a difference in their own political regimes (Esarey and Qiang, 2008; Kelly, 2006), and China is no exception. By reconceptualizing collective action as 'a phenomenon of boundary crossing between private and public domains,' Bimber et al. (2005: 365) placed these seemingly personalized online phenomena into a larger category of collective action, responding to the trend of integrating collective action on- and offline. Although a great deal of research has been conducted in Western countries over the past few decades, little is known about Chinese collective action and its social, political, and cultural context, which is unique and remains largely unexplained.

According to a report by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2015), by the end of 2014, 649 million people in China were using the Internet, making up 47.9% of the total population. Chinese online collective action has transformed from being a synonym for a disorderly, unhealthy, and illegal phenomenon to a more accepted activity. It is now commonly understood as collective behavior with a positive social influence (Du, 2009; Qiu et al., 2014) or 'individual or collective efforts based on a common effect, stimulus or target, which happened on the Internet or were influenced by the Internet' (Yue et al., 2010: 101). Although emphasis has been

placed on this medium as a promising method of political participation, a large number of questions remain unanswered, such as the nature of online collective action, the role of the Internet, and the difference between on- and offline collective action.

Based on a review of Chinese and foreign academic research, we found that most studies referred to the demand, supply, and mobilization process of online collective action, as proposed by Klandermans and Van Stekelenburg (2013). This 'market metaphor' has our special attention as it functions as the roadmap for this article. *Demand* refers to the mobilizing potential in a society for collective action; it refers to the participants' motivations, in terms of instrumentality, identity, and ideology. People participate in certain collective actions to try to influence the social and political environment, to manifest one's identification with a group, or to express one's opinion and views. *Supply*, on the other hand, refers to the opportunities staged by organizers to protest. It refers to the resources used by the organizations to entice people to participate in certain actions. Do organizers stage activities that appeal to people? Demand and supply do not automatically come together. *Mobilization* is the process that links the two. It can be seen as the marketing mechanism of the movement domain. Mobilization campaigns attempt to bring demand and supply together. The (on- and/or offline) mobilizing structure that organizers assemble is the connecting tissue between the supply-side of organizers and their appeals and the demand-side of participants and their motives (Klandermans, 1997, 2002; Klandermans and Van Stekelenburg, 2013).

Although the differences and similarities between each process of on- and offline activism have been examined to some extent (Brunsting and Postmes, 2002; Earl, 2010; Earl and Kimport, 2009; Earl and Schussman, 2002; JH Yang, 2009; Yue and Xue, 2011; Yue et al., 2010), integrated analyses are still rare. While some studies utilized the demand-supply theory (Klandermans, 1997, 2002; Klandermans and Van Stekelenburg, 2013) to explain the interaction between on- and offline collective action in the Western context, it is unclear whether these findings can be generalized to other social and cultural contexts (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013). According to Lipset (1959) and 'revised modernization theory' (Inglehart and Welzel, 2010), economic growth may prompt collective action participation and democracy by changing people's values, at least in Western societies. On the other hand, the dramatic growth of on- and offline collective action (Göbel and Ong, 2012) and the changing values structure from traditional Confucian values to materialism or post-materialism (Wu, 2013) in prosperous areas of

China indicate that collective action in this country is undergoing similar processes to Western countries. Therefore, we expect the demand-supply model to be applicable to collective action in China also.

To understand the bigger picture of online collective action in contemporary China and to answer the questions mentioned above, we attempt to integrate relevant work within the framework of the demand-supply theory, and discuss it in terms of the social, political, and cultural context of China. The nature, effect, and future of online collective action in China will be discussed in the conclusion of the article.

Supply of online collective action

Resource mobilization and political process theory emphasize that the key factors influencing participation in collective action are resources and political opportunities available to aggrieved people; grievances are ubiquitous, while collective action is not (McCarthy and Zald, 1987). Therefore, we focus first on the supply of online collective action, particularly the specific political context and the role of the Internet in arousing, maintaining, and strengthening instrumental, identity, and ideological motivation.

Political environment
Political policy in relation to the Internet in shaping the macro context of online collective action remains controversial. On the one hand, the Chinese government promotes the IT industry and encourages civic expression, but on the other hand, various strategies are used to control and disrupt communication and the diffusion of information online. First, the government attempts to formulate behavioral norms and duties for Internet users and service providers by promulgating regulations directly. For example, Netizens (*wangmin*)[1] are not allowed to post information harmful to national interests, and Internet companies are responsible for censoring and managing information disseminated on their websites (Yang, 2003). Second, the Chinese authorities use various indirect censorship strategies that create covert boundaries to online behavior, for example, automatically filtering keywords through the use of computer technology, or by employing human labor to physically monitor and delete sensitive topics (Esarey and Qiang, 2008; Svensson, 2014; Yang, 2003, 2006). Third, to induce self-regulating behavior, psychological measures or ideological propaganda, such as punishing the violator publicly and emphasizing public and national interests, are used to repress and cultivate Internet users and companies, making them feel they are always being watched and controlled (Svensson, 2014; Yang,

2006). Finally, when websites or forums are out of control from the Chinese government's perspective, such as when they disseminate or discuss sensitive topics, or call for collective action, they are blocked or shut down (Yang, 2003). When Internet users transgress the boundaries, they may be in danger of having their online accounts closed, or even being imprisoned. One notorious case concerns a well-known micro-blogger, Xue Manzi, with over 12 million followers on Sina Weibo, who was accused of soliciting prostitutes and was forced to confess publicly on CCTV that he was 'the maker and peddler of rumors' (Svensson, 2014; Yang, 2014).

Overall, when analyzing the Chinese government's policies and strategies (Zheng and Zhang, 2012), we found that most of them reflect so-called paternalistic administration (Gaidytė, 2012). The goal is to prompt the development of a harmonious society, as well as to consolidate the government's authority and domination. Limited freedom of information is allowed as long as it is within set boundaries. In this sense, the government and the public are cooperators; the state requires people to express their opinions and emotions on various non-sensitive issues, which serve to reveal social problems and potential threats to the leadership (Balla, 2012; Zheng and Zhang, 2012). Once the limit is exceeded, the interaction between Netizens and the government becomes more conflictive, which in turn may enhance cooperation among Internet users, or even motivate Chinese-style action online (Zheng and Wu, 2005).

Instrumentality

As mentioned above, instrumentality, identity, and ideology are three important motivations and social psychological mechanisms behind people's participation in collective action. Studies relating to the supply of collective action primarily focus on repertoires and effectiveness, as well as on the ideology and social identity supplied by the organization to attract potential participants (Klandermans, 2002; Klandermans and Van Stekelenburg, 2013).

We start with instrumentality of supply. Issues such as operational efficacy, social influence, power, and charismatic leaders represent classic efficacy and instrumentality in offline activism (Klandermans, 2002; Klandermans and Van Stekelenburg, 2013). However, these issues seem to be less important when it comes to online activism. Although having thousands of 'followers' or 'likes' might create a new mode of power and charisma, and therewith social influence, this definitely needs more research. Having said that, the Internet *does* provide the supply-side with instrumental power, because of the low-cost, widespread, and decentralized dissemina-

tion of the Internet, it provides opportunities to overcome the barriers thrown up by the tight hold the Chinese government has over social organizations and traditional media (we will elaborate on this below). We focus first on the basic elements of the story, including who is the organizer, where the event is happening, and the role of the Internet.

Communication on the Internet: We first discuss communication on the Internet, as it is the basic element determining the characteristics of online collective action. Scholars in Western countries have already elucidated the role of the Internet in stimulating collective action, and there are three important factors equally applicable to China (Yang, 2003). Though these are related to each other and their influence overlaps, they still play distinct roles in shaping the demand, supply, and mobilization of online collective action. The first factor is that the low cost of communicating online facilitates both the publication of and access to information on particular collective actions. It also reduces the cost of participation and organization (Kelly, 2006). The low cost may even alter the fundamental mechanisms of participation, that is, the free-rider dilemma may be reduced or vanish altogether online, and resource mobilization theory may be reformulated when activism is no longer so costly (Bimber et al., 2005; Earl et al., 2010). The second factor is that the Internet encourages the diffusion of information on an unprecedented scale and allows collaboration to be more place and time independent. The new mode of communication offered by the Internet also makes censorship and repression of dissenting opinions more difficult, which attracts more and more people to use the Internet to get information and communicate (Alberici and Milesi, 2016; Lei, 2011; Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010). Finally, the decentralization of online communication changes the status of Netizens from passively receiving news to actively searching, framing, and releasing information (Esarey and Qiang, 2008; Qiu, 2009), which increases the power and independence of the public and undermines opinions propagated by the official media (Lei, 2011).

In addition, Göbel and Ong (2012) pointed to the special role of Chinese ICTs in compensating for the inadequacy of formal channels to express discontent to the authorities. ICTs improve the ability of the public to obtain information relating to their well-being or learn from the experience of previous initiatives, and connect activists and potential participants in sharing grievances or organizing activities. In short, the new features of online communication as the basic supply structure can endow new power to other elements and may bring about new arts of

collective action (Yang, 2003).

Virtual community platform: Although driven primarily by commercial interests, virtual communities such as sohu.com (www.sohu.com/), Sina.com (www.sina.com/), and Netease.com (www.163.com/) have become important channels for political participation in contemporary China. Three influential platforms have emerged on the Chinese Internet. The first was the Bulletin Board System (BBS), created in 1998 (Zheng and Zhang, 2012), which, as a variation of wall posters in the information age in China, also takes on the role of voicing dissent and motivating potential activists both on- and offline (G Yang, 2009a). It remains popular and influential today. One example is the 'Strengthening the Nation Forum' (*Qiangguo luntan*), where thousands of posts and a high level of responses are observed each day; topics range from national events to Chinese political, economic, and societal issues. The users even openly discuss how to use BBS to improve democratic government (Yang, 2003).

The second platform is blogs, which became the dominant online platform following their introduction in China in 2002. The popularity of blogs can be partly explained by their advantages in terms of communication and organization, such as horizontal network, low-cost participation, relatively independent bloggers, and high speed of information diffusion (Esarey and Qiang, 2008; Zheng and Zhang, 2012).

The third platform is micro-blogs (*weibo*[2]), which were created in 2010 and are similar to Twitter in Western countries (Zheng and Zhang, 2012). The most famous micro-blog platforms in China are Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo, with 536 and 540 million accounts, respectively, by 2013 (PL Li et al., 2013). In contrast to the fading of Twitter in most countries, more Chinese now prefer *weibo* to obtain firsthand and diverse information, share opinions, respond quickly to emerging events, and initiate activities (Svensson, 2014).

Organization structure online: NGOs, SMOs, and self-organization: As scholars have previously indicated, the Internet provides a platform for formal organizations, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or social movement organizations (SMOs), and facilitates their mobilization and organization of collective action both on- and offline. Moreover, the Internet also gave birth to a relatively novel self-organization, allowing the rise of online opinion leaders and personalized content sharing (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), which is particularly important in China.

First, in Western countries, NGOs and SMOs use the Internet to distribute information on the reasons, goals, and strategies of particular planned activities (Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010). However, in China, social movement organizations are under strict supervision, have no true legitimate existence, and receive little attention (White et al., 1996 Yang, 2003). Many social groups and organizations have chosen websites, BBS, and email lists to build and enhance their networks. They may have an offline entity or be wholly web-based, but they typically operate both on- and offline. Yang (2006) has stated that the most active Internet-mediated networks in China are probably the environmental associations, such as Green-web (www.green-web.org/), Greener-Beijing (www.gbi.org.cn/), and Desert.org.cn (www.desert.org.cn/). Among these web-based groups, Green-web and Greener-Beijing, with 4000 and 2700 registered members respectively, are relatively better known (Yang, 2006).

Second, ICTs have empowered ordinary people by expanding their access to information and allowing them the opportunity to set the political agenda. The Internet also significantly reduces the cost of organizing actions and participating in politics. As in other countries, the self-organized structure in China can also be described as organizationally decentered, distributed, or flattened (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012) because the Internet provides an inexpensive, convenient, and flexible participation channel for the grassroots, and there is no need to establish or rely on professional SMOs in some collective actions (Bimber, 1998; Earl and Kimport, 2009; Earl and Schussman, 2002). Yet, the situation is still difficult for Chinese cyber activists when compared with Western regions where individuals or small groups can use specialized websites (such as petitiononline.com) or tools to create, host, or develop actions themselves (Earl, 2013). In China, most self-organized actions are still within the commercial virtual communities and under close supervision. They enjoy relative freedom and imagined empowerment through invisible measures (Gong and Yang, 2010; Zhang, 2012).

All of these conditions have created a new generation of online opinion leaders and a new type of self-organized participant, when compared with the formal leadership and organizations emphasized in classical collective action theories (Earl, 2013; Earl and Kimport, 2009; Esarey and Qiang, 2008; Sheng and Gao, 2013; Svensson, 2014). On the one hand, the traditional elites and public intellectuals have become more visible and influential due to the relatively unconstrained, equal, and pluralistic Internet technology. On the other hand, a group of opinion leaders is emerging, with diverse identities, such as

executives, scholars, entertainment stars, and officials. And they usually possess the critical information sources and complex communication networks which significantly contribute to their status, power, and charisma (Sheng and Gao, 2013; Svensson, 2014). For example, Pan Shiyi, who is a Chinese entrepreneur and one of the most influential opinion leaders on *weibo* with more than 14 million followers, posts the air pollution index for Beijing and Shanghai every day (Sheng and Gao, 2013; Zhang, 2012). Or take Yao Chen, a famous Chinese actor, whose posts on social and public welfare issues have the largest number of followers in *weibo* (about 35 million).

Identity and ideology
In addition to instrumentality, the identity and ideology provided by organizations or groups are two other important factors that attract people to participate in traditional collective action. Online collective action is dominated by self-organization and individual action. Identity may develop in one of three ways as a result of Internet usage, and correspond to different forms of activism: (1) existing collective identity is strengthened; (2) a new collective identity is formed; or (3) an individual identity and personalized expression is formed beyond a common group identity (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Gong and Yang, 2010). First, the Internet provides various opportunities to enhance the bond between an organization and group members, which can be seen as the extension of collective identity offline and can be illustrated by collective actions mobilized by NGOs or other groups (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Second, new technology prompts the discussion and interaction among dispersed people, shaping group boundaries and fostering collective identities based on common interest, beliefs, and ideas (Kelly, 2006). Moreover, the anonymous nature of computer-mediated communication (CMC) could distract people's attention from other identities and result in new group norms becoming more salient or make the character of the imagined community closer to their own expectations (Alberici and Milesi, 2016; Polletta et al., 2013; Zhang, 2012). False consensus effect and overestimation of group efficacy (Brunsting and Postmes, 2002) may contribute to the popularity of self-organized action online. At times, the virtual self-organized communities transform into actual entities and may exert a social impact on further interaction (Gong and Yang, 2010). Third, in China – where social organizations or groups are rare and most interactions are controlled – a relatively decentered, flattened, or distributed form of online collective action is particularly evident, which is based prima-

rily on the sharing of personal beliefs, information, and activities through BBS, blogs, websites, and other media platforms, without latent or salient collective identity (Bimber et al., 2005).

In addition, collective action organizations disseminate social-political ideology and beliefs, frame collective action by emphasizing the unfairness in society, disadvantaged groups, or the duty of the public, or connect goals with a basic framework such as human, female, and animal rights (Klandermans, 2002). In contemporary China, one focus of the public discourse is the power struggle of the grassroots population. Underlying the interaction of culture, political control, and communication technology, a new spirit of cultural irony is gradually becoming popular and influential (Gong and Yang, 2010). Although not aimed at subverting the political regime, the powerless people in China now prefer to use dark humor, parody, and satire online to express their discontent with social inequality and abuse of power, and also to criticize and challenge the discourses and ideologies propagated by the authorities (Zheng and Zhang, 2012).

Demand of online collective action

As the 'demand-supply' theory hypothesizes, people partake in collective action and social movements because their motivations are rooted in one or more type of grievances (Klandermans, 1997). Although these basic motivations are typically discussed in the Western context, they seem to apply to the Chinese context, too. Yet, we can also observe some specifically Chinese types of grievances based on the country's particular social and political background.

Root cause: grievances
The majority of the motivations behind Chinese online collective action are rooted in discontent stemming from the real world although the Internet has also produced new issues and grievances for civil engagement and protest (Polletta et al., 2013). Specifically, the rapid economic development since the post-Mao reforms has resulted in citizens with a consciousness and willingness to participate politically. At the same time, the uncoordinated growth of the social system and the misconduct of some officials accelerated the unequal distribution of social wealth and power, leading to a build up of social conflict (Liu, 2012; LR Li et al., 2013; Qiu et al., 2014; Zhang and Chen, 2012). Due to the lack of formal channels for expression and resistance, Chinese citizens used the Internet to seek and propagate information on incidents or events exemplifying their discontent (Pei, 2000). It is inter-

esting that the underling psychological attributes of these 'hot events' correspond to the categories of grievances proposed by Klandermans (1997).

First, events labeled as 'social injustice,' 'rights protest,' 'economic exploitation,' and 'culture struggle' are often the result of the unhealthy political system, inappropriate management, and the unequal allocation of resources. These issues adversely affect people's economic situation, their rights to a standard of living and development, as well as the opportunities for information and expression. Second, the discontent triggered by 'international events,' 'nationalism,' 'intergroup conflict,' and 'environmental issues' is contributed to by unexpected encounters that violate or threaten the rights of citizens. For instance, in September 2012, the Japanese government purchased three of the Senkaku Islands from their private owner and nationalized them. The ownership of the Senkaku Islands has been source of a conflict between China and Japan for hundreds of years, and the Japanese government's actions aroused great anger and a huge wave of protest both on- and offline in China. Finally, events such as 'official corruption,' 'abuse of power,' 'immorality of the rich and famous,' and 'deviance and scandals' contradict the important moral and value codes in China and could incite anger and condemnation among people. In June 2011, a woman bragged about her wealth on her micro-web. It was then implied by Netizens that she had a close relationship with the Red Cross, which resulted in a serious crisis of trust in the Red Cross and a drop in donations around the country (Du and Wei, 2010; Qiu et al., 2014; Yang, 2014).

However, most events do not involve one simple grievance. For example, incidents involving government officials or the rich not only violate moral principles, but also directly reflect the unjust distribution of resources and power, and even contribute to further disadvantage people. Sudden natural disasters may also deepen public distrust and discontent towards the government if improper management was an underlying factor. Moreover, issues such as 'social injustice,' 'international events,' and 'official corruption' characterize and are the primary content of the instrumental, identity, and ideological motivations for online activism in China.

Motivations for participation in online collective action

In order for people to participate in collective action, widespread grievances are not sufficient; grievances must be transformed into motives, including instrumental, identity, and ideological motives (Klandermans, 1997). Although the basic content and mechanisms of these motives are consistent across many situations, specific differences can be

discovered depending on unique contexts (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2014; Van Stekelenburg et al., 2009). Generally speaking, most on- and offline collective action in the contemporary Chinese context does not oppose the existing political system and ideology because of Confucianism and market economic values. Confucianism cultivates obedience to authority while market economic values make material interests relatively more important (PL Li et al., 2013; Liu, 2008).

Specifically, with regard to instrumentality, people participating in Internet-based activism want to use the new media to demand their rights or interests, and believe that they can obtain support from the public or influence the government's decision-making through collective efforts both on- and offline. Therefore, they tend to finish the action once their goal is achieved or the triggering event has ended (Balla, 2012; Qiu et al., 2014; Xue et al., 2013; Zhang and Chen, 2012).

Second, research shows that group identity, which is based on common beliefs and background, is created during online interaction, and is significantly predictive of participation in online action in China (Qiu, 2009; Qiu et al., 2014). Qiu et al. (2014) found that some Netizens who join social and political online communities expressed care for the fate of their nation and its people, were concerned about social problems, and understood that rebuilding social justice was their responsibility. However, they also found that some people joined online communities, groups, or organizations out of loneliness or the desire to belong. When these identities with online communities or groups were threatened, they were more likely to take action, particularly radical action. Moreover, Xue et al. (2013) proposed that participants who join in the same action might be driven by two different levels of identification: identification with the group at stake or identification with the social movement organization. Specifically, people with a strong identification with the group at stake, such as national identity, took part in online activism because they felt angry and efficacious, while people with a strong organizational identity, such as school identity, participated in online actions merely because they perceived high efficacy.

Finally, there appears to be a difference in the ideological motivation between Western countries and China in terms of content and mechanism. On the one hand, Western societies have experienced a shift from long-term social movements driven by clear ideologies and based on a stable social group identity, to personalized actions focused on self-expression and participation, and propelled by new media technology (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Inglehart
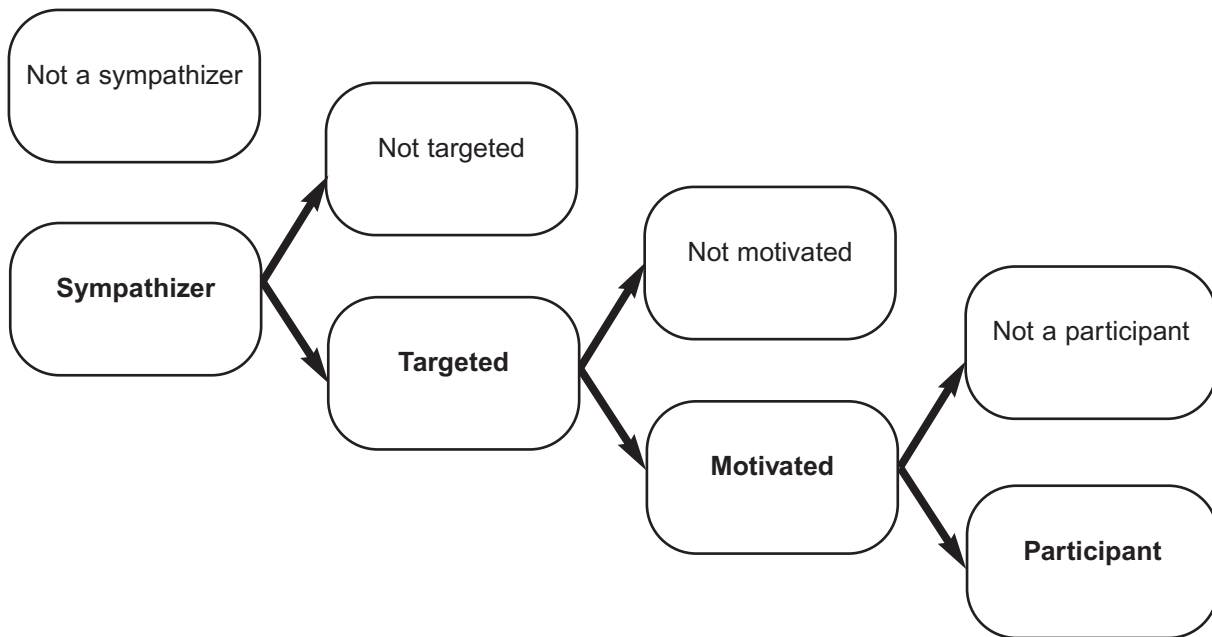
Figure 1. The process of action mobilization (Klandermans and Oegema, 1987)

and Welzel, 2010; Klandermans et al., 1988; Qiu et al., 2014). However, in China, most justice-driven collective action triggered by the violation of groups' morals is usually transient, without specific ideology or fixed social identity. Netizens attempt to express their own opinions and emotions via various kinds of behaviors, or to restore justice by having an impact on certain people or the government. Once their demands are satisfied or the reason has dissipated, the actions come to an end (Qiu, 2009; Qiu et al., 2014; Zhang and Chen, 2012). On the other hand, evidence has shown that, in the context of international and humanitarian events, ideological motivation plays a more important role in initiating Chinese people's participation, especially when these are low risk and low cost activities, compared to high risk and high cost activities (Xue et al., 2014).

Mobilization of online collective action

Evidence has shown that demand and supply alone are not sufficient to result in collective action, it requires mobilization to bring people together. Mobilization can be divided into two strands: consensus mobilization and action mobilization. Consensus mobilization refers to the transmission of the goals and ideology of the action organization. The more successful consensus mobilization is, the larger the pool of sympathizers a mobilizing movement organization can draw from. In their frame alignment approach to mobilization, Snow and Benford and their colleagues elaborate on consensus

mobilization much further (see Benford, 1997 for a critical review; and Snow et al., 2004 for an overview). Action mobilization, on the other hand, refers to the process of transforming a potential participant who identifies with the views of the action organization into an actual participant (Klandermans and Van Stekelenburg, 2013). Klandermans and Oegema (1987) broke the process of action mobilization down into four separate steps: people (1) need to *sympathize* with the cause, (2) need to *know* about the upcoming event, (3) must *want* to participate, and (4) must be *able* to participate (see Figure 1).

Each step brings the supply and demand of protest closer together until an individual eventually takes the final step to participate in an instance of political protest. It is interesting that this framework of mobilization can also be applied to self-organizing online activism, whose mobilization process includes a series of steps: forming shared grievances among the public, framing an appealing goal, reaching as many potential participants as possible, and conquering barriers to take action.

Consensus mobilization

Chinese people are used to the domination of the state without opposition because of the government's strategy of isolating people from foreign information and ideology and the centralized party ideology that cultivates in the public authoritarian values through the education system and the official media. Although there are questions and discontent among the public, it was not until the emergence and ubiq-

uitous use of the Internet that the public was provided with varying opinions (Esarey and Qiang, 2008; Yang, 2006). As Lei (2011) discovered, compared with traditional media and non-media users, Chinese Netizens were more critical of the party-state and more likely to support the norms of democracy. These politicized Netizens constitute a potential and active group of participants to challenge the authoritarian rules.

An important mechanism of dissemination online is that opinion leaders act as online citizen journalists, linking the outside world and home, both on- and offline. There are many differences between traditional journalists and online citizen journalists. The former earn a salary as a journalist and are supervised by the official media system which is controlled or managed by governments at different levels, so their behavior is more constrained. The latter are relatively independent and anonymous, with crucial information resources and complex networks, and are more credible and influential among Netizens (Esarey and Qiang, 2008; Svensson, 2014). The opinion leaders on *weibo,* for example, whose followers can range from hundreds of thousands to millions, typically release firsthand information drawn from their own experience, and transmit other critical information. Therefore, the information being transmitted and discussed by other Netizens becomes the focus of public opinion, which can lead to consensus or action mobilization (Sheng and Gao, 2013).

Action mobilization

Frame the reason, find the target, and tell people what to do: While the public has agreed upon a general shared grievance, people still need an explanation of the events or actions to evoke their anger and indignation and motivation to protest. This is what a collective action frame does, a collective action frame provides a coherent message on: (1) what's going on? (2) who is to blame? and (3) what can we do?

The first step in action mobilization is to create as large a pool of sympathizers as possible. As Snow and Benford (1988, 2000) have demonstrated, a collective action frame that interprets events or occurrences through a certain meaning or belief can assist in 'mobilizing potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists' through inspiring the emotions of bystanders and legitimizing the activities (Snow and Benford, 1988: 198). Moreover, the social and cultural background must be taken into consideration to understand how a collective action frame shapes the reactions of the public regarding an event. As

mentioned previously, events that are conceived in terms of corruption, wealth, and power attract more attention and incite action among the Netizens (Yang, 2006). For example, in 2008, Zhou Jiugeng, the Secretary of the Real Estate Office and Civil Administration Office in the Jiangning district in Nanjing City, gave a speech about high real estate prices, causing discontentment and anger. However, the speech did not attract attention until someone noticed his expensive watch and other luxuries, which resulted in a collective investigation of his private situation, leading to the exposure of bribery.

The second step in action mobilization is to spread the call for action to a large constituency. Networks and organizations play a crucial role in this stage. Benefiting from the technology of the Internet, social networks have extended their role from a communication tool in traditional collective action (Klandermans and Van Stekelenburg, 2013) to an organizing agent (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Specifically, social organizations and informal groups in China have created web pages and BBS forums to establish group identities, or created links with peer and other international organizations to form loose networks. For example, to protect the Nu River[3] in 2003, an email list and campaign website were created to disseminate information regarding the action and to facilitate discussion on campaign strategies. The shift from organizational mobilization to personal mobilization in modern society indicates the popularity and function of personal level networks. That is to say, by sharing personal information, ideas, or relationships on BBS, websites, blogs, micro-blogs, or across these virtual communities simultaneously, a new communication network, functioning as the core organization, is formed, grows, and gains stability based on certain events (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011; Castells, 2004; Yang, 2006). Moreover, though without strong organizational control, the distribution of resources and power in this social network is not even. Powerless individual actors or so-called 'losers,' such as migrant workers, still require the assistance of opinion leaders to organize successful actions. For example, in 2012, a migrant school founded by migrant workers in Beijing was closed down by the local government. In desperation, the schoolmaster, who was a migrant singer prior to working at the school, wrote posts on *weibo* to ask for assistance. After his posts were forwarded by celebrities, scholars, and NGOs, the closure received media attention and the school was saved (Svensson, 2014).

Activities combined with motivation: The third step in action mobilization is selecting or

organizing specific activities according to the social psychological motivations of the sympathizers (Klandermans and Van Stekelenburg, 2013). Several novel types of collective action have been created during online interaction (Flam, 2005; Polletta et al., 2013; Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010). In this section, we illustrate some unique forms of activism in contemporary China and explore their underlying social psychological mechanisms.

Online collective action can be divided into three forms, or levels: (1) verbal expression online; (2) behavior expression online; and (3) crowd event online (Yue et al., 2010). First, verbal expression online, a common form of activism worldwide (Earl, 2013), refers to the Netizens expressing an opinion or emotion regarding a certain event or collective action through the utilization of BBS, chatroom, blog, wiki, or other platform. Moreover, in China, the public also uses this form to exert pressure on relevant government officials or authorities to seek change to an undesirable situation, since there are seldom formal channels for them to achieve this goal. As has been found, this type of collective 'voice' is deemed acceptable by the state and can make a difference, when it is not attempting to undermine the state (Zheng and Wu, 2005).

Second, behavior expression online refers to actions that only happen on the Internet and are spontaneous and unorganized, including individual behaviors. It also reflects the transformation of the pattern of collective action participation, from organizational-based, 'identity politics,' long-term engagements, and forms of collective behaviors to individual- or informal group-based, 'issue politics,' temporary engagements, and more personalized forms of behaviors (Roggeband and Duyvendak, 2013).

Typical Chinese examples of behavior expression online are individual efforts such as *egao* and collective efforts, including 'human flesh research.' *Egao*, defined by *China Daily* as 'a popular subculture that deconstructs serious themes to entertain people with comedy effects. The two characters "e" meaning "evil" and "gao" meaning "work" combine to describe a subculture that is characterized by humor, revelry, subversion, grass-root spontaneity, defiance of authority, mass participation and multi-media high-tech' (Gong and Yang, 2010: 4). *Egao* can be seen as a counterpart to 'culture jamming' in Western countries (Van Lear and Van Aelst, 2010). The popularity of *egao* in modern China is not only due to its entertainment function, but also because of the opportunity and vehicle it offers powerless people to express their discontentment and to transgress social stratification (Esarey and Qiang, 2008; Flam, 2005; Gong and Yang, 2010). Therefore,

some scholars prefer to use 'liberating cultural practice' to interpret it rather than seeing it as 'something detrimental to the establishment' (Gong and Yang, 2010). One of the most famous examples is the video *The Bloody Case of a Steamed Bun*, created by Hu Ge, a grassroots activist in China. Ge attempted to remake the film *The Promise*, which was directed by Chen Kaige, a world-famous director, to express his disappointment with the film. The video was then quickly shared online, created discussion, and was influential on the Internet (Gong and Yang, 2010).

'Human flesh research' (*ren rou sou suo*) is an extreme and influential online collective behavior in China and used as an important self-empowering means to judge corrupt government officials or immoral individuals (Qiu et al., 2014). It calls for collaborative research among Internet users to track the process of an event, to find the identity of a person, or to reveal the truth of an incident (Wang et al., 2010; Yin and He, 2011; Yue et al., 2010). It typically begins with a widespread post pointing to an immoral event or questionable behavior. Then, Internet experts or hackers follow up on the event and act as the leader to organize collective searches exposing detailed information about the event or person involved. Ordinary Netizens are in charge of denouncing the guilty party by commenting or providing information. Under the pressure of public opinion, the targeted person may appear on the Internet to clarify the truth or apologize. Sometimes, an offline force (typically the government) will intervene to punish the responsible person or control the development of the event (Ren, 2008). For example, in 2006, a short video about a Chinese woman who killed a kitten with her high heel was disseminated widely on the Internet, which triggered great anger and discussion online. After voluntary collaboration of thousands of Netizens, her identity and personal information were disclosed and she was forced to leave her job and move.

Finally, compared with online verbal expression and behavior expression which only happen on the Internet, 'crowd event online' mainly refers to group activities which involve online and offline interactions. Qiu et al. (2014) noted that this collective behavior was not highly organized, nor did it involve a clear ideology. Du and Wei (2010: 44, our translation) have also argued that the nature of crowd events online is 'a kind of communication process mobilized by the group of Netizens who base [the event] on a specific theme and different purposes, and use the method of online assembly to create social opinion or prompt social action. It may be spontaneous or organized, may be orderly, healthy, or disorderly, unhealthy.' Crowd event online could

be triggered by an online post or an offline event. The final development of the event into the real world indicates its influence and the need for additional motivation and mobilization, to some extent. For example, in 2006, a PX chemical industry project was accused of causing huge levels of pollution in Xiamen. The legal options to oppose the project were not successful, so the local residents organized a demonstration using the Internet and mobile phones to disseminate information around the action and to mobilize people to participate (G Yang, 2009a; Yue et al., 2010).

Overcoming barriers: Finally, the last step in action mobilization is to overcome the barriers inherent to collective action. Hence, people are sympathizing with the cause, they know about the upcoming event, and they are motivated to take part. Yet, still at this stage barriers can prevent them from taking action. Important questions concerning barriers are how to avoid government supervision, and how to maximize the effects of the action.

In Western countries, mature websites or 'Action Centers' have been created to facilitate various collective actions both on- and offline (Earl, 2010). However, in China, public expression, particularly involving criticism of the state or state policy, advocating political action, or openly conflicting with party ideology, remains subject to severe censorship and control (Esarey and Qiang, 2008: 756). In order to entice people to participate in political topics that concern them, many strategies have been employed. For example, some social groups have attempted to launch political discussions on non-political websites such as *Jin Yong Martial Arts Novels*, a website that focuses on individuals' shared hobbies (Zheng and Wu, 2005). For ordinary Netizens or individual activists, to avoid censorship or lower their risk, a new strategy of 'protective' irony in the way they express themselves has emerged on the Internet characterized by the use of abstract, satirical, and coded language, and neologisms, influenced by Chinese traditional culture (Esarey and Qiang, 2008, 2011; G Yang, 2009a; Zheng and Zhang, 2012). For example, the word 'harmonize' (*he-xie*), from the party's propaganda of 'a harmonious society' is used to satirize state censorship or repression (Zheng and Zhang, 2012). The use of the passive voice and past participle 'be done,' such as 'be harmonized,' 'be suicided,' and 'be benefited' was also used to ridicule the disadvantaged and passive status of the grassroots Netizens themselves (Shi, 2009). It should be noted that this kind of humor could be used in various types of online collective action, particularly in verbal expression.

However, most of the time, in order for their voice to be widely heard or achieve the goal of the action, activists or organizations obtain assistance from the traditional media, which is controlled by the state or high-level government authorities. The role of the central media is particularly important when people want to uncover and punish the misconduct of local government. Researchers in China have found that 'initiating on the Internet' + 'involving the central media' + 'eye-catching' is a successful combination to disseminate information, and that 'involving the central media' is the most effective interaction between on- and offline (LR Li et al., 2013). This is why local officials in China are usually more afraid of media disclosure than of public appeals and collective action aimed at redressing wrongs (Jiang, 2000; Shi and Cai, 2006). For example, the local government and miners attempted to conceal the mining accident in Nandan, Guangxi in 2001 for about 15 days, but the *People's Daily*, a newspaper controlled by the central government, finally exposed it. When the news was released, it not only resulted in discussion on 'Strengthening the Nation Forum' (QGLT), the virtual community affiliated with *People's Daily*, but also caught the attention and intervention of the state leader (Yang, 2006; Zheng, 2003).

Discussion and conclusion

This article has attempted to explore online collective action in China by integrating the demand-supply theory with relevant research from China and abroad. In the final section, we summarize the features of this new form of political participation for Chinese people and analyze its effects on social and political development in China. Based on this, we suggest future research.

Characteristics of online collective action
The evolution of Internet activism in terms of demand, supply, and mobilization indicates its undeniable and controversial effect on social life and political development in China.

First, scholars have demonstrated that Chinese people mobilize and participate in traditional collective action primarily to compensate for material deficits (Liu, 2009). This does not imply that people do not want to express their emotions and ideology, however the lack of formal channels and the high cost relative to benefits obtained force them to stifle their complaints. Chinese Netizens feel strongly about online activism due to instrumental motivation, but also to express their emotions or for ideo-

logical expression (G Yang, 2009b). Moreover, with the growing popularity of the Internet and as awareness grows concerning political participation among the public, there may be more need for formal or informal channels, both on- and offline, to express people's 'desire for justice, the sympathy for the weak, the revulsion of corrupt officials, the disappointment in the government, the mockery of the rich and authorities, and even the appeal for revolution' (G Yang, 2009b: 61, our translation).

Second, in Western democratized countries, collective action is typically part of a long-term campaign or social movement with a clear objective. In modern China, scholars found that most collective action on- and offline is transient, spontaneous, and self-organized; formal organization-based activism is rare (Liu, 2009; Qiu et al., 2014; G Yang, 2009a). However, clear organizing structures, leadership, and division of labor is a new feature of Internet activists and continue to evolve (G Yang, 2009a).

Finally, the strategies of mobilization and action are also evolving; that is, instead of blind and emotional action, methods that are more legitimate are being used, such as applying more legal procedures and other strategies to avoid state sanctions. For example, inspired by the success of the anti-PX event, successors have used the words 'take a walk,' 'relieve boredom,' and 'heeling' to replace 'protest,' 'assembly,' and 'demonstrate' when they communicate with each other online (Yang, 2006, 2009a).

The effects and future of online collective action

Since online collective action has gained in popularity, scholars have proposed diverse arguments and opinions regarding the influence of the Internet and online activism on the construction of society and politics in China. Some indicate both positive and negative effects. For example, based on practical experience, some people believed that the Internet could assist in cultivating a civil consciousness to prompt civil society and to expand political liberalization in the future, although the Internet and online collective action cannot change the political system in China in the short-term. In fact, though, some online collective action has already successfully forced state authorities to modify or substitute certain policies and regulations (Du, 2009; Lei, 2011; Qiu, 2009; Yang, 2003; Zheng and Wu, 2005).

Others worry that it will be more difficult to mobilize collective political action due to the gradually tightening control on the Internet and the indifference of the majority of people towards politics. On the other hand, there are danger signs that this new type of political participation may fall into a kind of polarizing populism or disrupt social order, implied in the naively idealistic attitudes towards cyber activism (Du, 2009; Guo and Wang, 2012; Zheng and Zhang, 2012).

In summary, since there are too many factors involved and some questions still need to be answered, it is difficult to make a clear judgment regarding the role and future of online collective action in China. In the future, at least two directions could be followed. The first is to compare the interaction of political policies and public values in online collective action participation between Western societies and China. The second one is to explore the relative importance of instrumentality, identity, and ideology in online collective action initiated by different kinds of events.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. 'Netizens' refers to Internet users in China. The Chinese word is *wangmin*, which was officially approved by the PRC's China National Committee for Terms in Sciences and Technologies in 1998.
2. *Weibo* is a type of China-based micro-blogging service and social network platform, based on relationships and sharing brief real-time information.
3. Nu River is one of the major rivers in southwest China. In August 2003, China's National Development and Reform Commission approved a proposal to build dams on the river, which may have resulted in severe environmental damage.

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résumé   la popularité d'Internet et de l'activisme en ligne offre au peuple chinois un canal révolutionnaire qui lui permet de s'exprimer et de participer à la politique. Cependant, les recherches actuelles affichent des perspectives bien différentes. Cet article tente d'intégrer le modèle de l'offre et de la demande dans des études pertinentes réalisées aussi bien en Chine qu'à l'étranger ; il effectue également une analyse systématique de la demande, de l'offre et de la mobilisation de l'action collective en ligne afin de mieux comprendre le contexte général et de développer des théories d'action collective basées sur les pays occidentaux. L'article traite de l'impact de cette nouvelle forme de participation politique sur le développement social en Chine et soulève des questions concernant les recherches à venir.

mots-clés   action collective en ligne ◆ demande ◆ mobilisation ◆ offre

resumen   La popularidad de Internet y el activismo online proporcionan un canal revolucionario para que las personas chinas puedan expresarse y participar en la política. Sin embargo, las investigaciones existentes ofrecen diferentes perspectivas. Este artículo trata de integrar el modelo de oferta y demanda con estudios conexos tanto de China como de otros países, a la vez que realiza un análisis sistemático de la demanda, la oferta y la movilización de la acción colectiva online con el fin de obtener una visión más amplia y elaborar teorías de acción colectiva basadas en los países occidentales. Se analiza el impacto de esta nueva forma de participación política en el desarrollo social de China y se plantean preguntas en relación con las investigaciones futuras.

palabras clave   acción colectiva online ◆ demanda ◆ movilización ◆ oferta